

Sincerely, your super-best-friend Kyle.

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Sincerely, your super-best-friend Kyle.

by [cocoacremeandgays](#)

Summary

Just breathe, dude.

I'm not Cartman.

((AKA- After growing up leaves the two all but physically separated, Kyle and Stan finally find something they can share with each other to feel normal again.))

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Prologue

December 22nd, 2012

Stan,

Out of everyone that I've grown up with in this weird-ass town, I'd have to say that you've changed the least.

The matter-of-fact and no-bullshit attitude of yours hasn't shifted in the slightest, and that logical manner in which you think doesn't seem to leave any room for change, anyway. You're still grounded, your feet are buried in the grass like the roots of a tree. If I'm honest, it's almost surprising that you haven't sunk down into the earth already.

By no means am I saying that you haven't changed at all; that would be a bold-faced lie. Your room has gone from the regular disorganization of an average child, to an almost immaculate representation of what every teen desires: to be perfect. People say that an individual's room is typically the window to the soul. A bedroom is basically the household equivalent to a person's eyes, I guess. Have a mix of cleanliness and mess? Congratulations, you're as fucked up as most other teens. Can't see the floor? You probably don't give a shit about what anyone thinks. Is your room spotless? Damn, aren't you just the perfect little angel.

I have to say that your room disproves that theory right in its origins. You're pretty fucked up, aren't you? And yet, you still manage to keep your room in an almost eerily still portrait of being completely... not lived in.

I know it's because you clean when you're high. It's pretty ironic, isn't it? Cleaning while you're high. Doing the one thing that you aren't being. I laughed as I wrote that, but I know that you won't. You'll probably read it over again, or something, or maybe you're reading this while you're high, and you'll be paranoid as hell that I'm actually watching you from the closet, or some shit. I promise I'm not, though.

Just breathe, dude.

I always did wonder what getting high would feel like. I mean, I've taken cough syrup, and that was intense as hell, but weed itself is probably different, right? You said so yourself. You've offered some to me before, but I couldn't. You know how my mom would totally freak if I came home smelling undeniably like weed. I always told myself that I wouldn't be friends with anyone who smoked weed, but you respected my decision and didn't push or ask why, and it made me feel safe.

Besides, I couldn't just drop you like that. I've known you my whole life.

I'm not Cartman.

It's a depressant, right? Weed? Continuously getting a bad rep for being a "gateway drug", even though there isn't any substantial evidence behind the claim? I don't mean to be insensitive, or anything, but a depressant seems like a weird thing for you to be taking. Does it help? Does it decrease stress? Do you think I could try? I could sleep over, and bring an extra change of clothes. I could shower just before I left and my mom would never know, and we could just.

Y'know?

Anyway, I'm rambling at this point. I'll let you go, now. Write back sometime, yeah?

I love you, man.

Sincerely,
your super-best-friend Kyle.

Action, Effect, Fate

Chapter Summary

An itching begins somewhere deep in his gut, and Stan pulls the joint back to his lips for another drag.

Chapter Notes

I broke the rule again.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The smoke billows from his mouth, up towards the ceiling, and dissipates. A calm washes over him, and all is silent in the Marsh house. The clocks, once ticking time bombs, have gone from round things hung on walls with their hands *clicking, clicking, clicking*, to silent little digital things, squirreled into digital sections of electric-colored polygons. There is no wind to brush the branches of pine trees against his window, and thanks to his dad's House Flipping phase, their residence no longer creaks and makes groaning noises when stepping on certain areas of the floors.

It's nearing two thirty in the morning. Although Randy is typically up past three in the morning cooking, or doing some other weird fucking shit, he's been passed out, drunk, on the couch since Stan came home from playing football with his friends at five thirty. At this point, he isn't sure whether he's supposed to thank the dormant, aggressive "alcoholism" (of course, he uses the term loosely) of his father, or feel something akin to loss from the fact that he's hardly had a single conversation with his dad in any recent memory. A piece of his brain wants to blame it for everything, try to hypothetically kick it in the balls and wish it away so it'll butt the fuck out of his life, but he knows he won't, and he knows he can't. Majority rules over minority, and majority doesn't want to. The idea was vetoed by his fucking conscious, anyway.

The digital clock reads "2:32", flashing into his eyes with big, obnoxiously blue lettering. It's early. Or late, he reminds himself in his muddled brain, the side of his left hand rubbing his nose. The same piece of him that wants to kick and scream at his father's personalized version of alcoholism tries to push Stan into thinking of whether two in the morning is "early" or "late" as something similar to a "glass half-empty" or "glass half-full" kind of thing. Which would which be? Would "early" relate to "empty" because they have the same color, or would "late" relate to "empty" because of their shared negative connotation?

Stan, tired and languid in all senses of the words, lifts the joint to his lips, inhales through his diaphragm, and shuts his eyes as he lets the smoke settle for just a few seconds. His next exhale is slow, savoring tastes and smells. He ignores the small amount of smoke that sneaks itself into his room rather than out the window, watches his pale fingertips grip the joint in contrast to his dark, monotonously-shaded room, and then slips his gaze to the side of his bed closest to his bedside table. There, heavily draped in shadows, lays a figure curled up in blankets from the cold, still Colorado air.

This figure laying just across from Stan is his best friend, Kyle. He's been asleep since eight thirty. The two boys had plans to do homework together, or maybe watch basketball clips on YouTube and order pizza at three in the morning just to spite the adults in the house, but Kyle had crawled into Stan's bed immediately after dinner and passed right the fuck out. It would be a lie to say that Stan wasn't disappointed in their plans falling through the floor, but he really couldn't bring himself to blame him. Kyle was used to the school-life, and he had yet to really break from his mom's strict schedule. Sometimes he was able to stay up until five in the morning, if there was caffeine in the mix, but the two of them rarely decided to drink that shit unless it was in highly-processed energy drink form. It typically wasn't appealing in the form of coffee to either of them, but that didn't stop Kyle from drinking it to near caffeine addiction whenever a stressful test was coming up. Thankfully, midterms are far enough away that he hasn't yet started going full-on panic mode.

An itching begins somewhere deep in his gut, and Stan pulls the joint back to his lips for another drag. His head thuds dryly on the windowsill, and his knees halfheartedly pulled up to his chest. With how shitty his posture currently is, leaned up against the window like he is, he would be surprised if he didn't have a slight curve for a while after he shifted from this position.

Stan focuses his easily-fleeting attention on the sound his inhale makes when he breathes the smoke into his lungs. It's a drawing sound, something that someone would expect to hear in one of those cheesy films they make you watch in health class. The same piece of him that wants to kick and scream at his father's personalized version of alcoholism, and the same piece of him that became caught up in two different uses of speech, wants to try and hear his breath in the vivid way that he would be able to if he pressed his ear against someone's back or chest. He wants to listen, and be, and exist, and create a rhythm with the sound of his own breathing like it's someone else's entirely.

Although tempted to try, he ultimately does not. He side-steps failure. He loses himself in the quiet inhales and exhales of his body-- not forcing himself to hear anything more, but not allowing himself to hear any less. They grow louder, out-of-sync, until he wonders if he's listening to his own breathing at all. The itching comes creeping back through his system, clawing at his liver and stomach until his spine forces a shudder and his brain forces a look towards Kyle.

Stan is met with open eyes.

He hears the shifting of fabric before he really registers that Kyle is pushing himself into a sitting position. Stan's brain rushes to catch up with the movements and the sounds, but he's much too relaxed to really be too concerned about the lack of coordination between sound

and self. He rubs his nose with his left hand again, careful with the joint pinched between his fingers.

"Are you smoking?" Kyle asks, voice thick with sleep. Stan flicks the wall with his thumbnail.

He replies, "no, I'm eating."

Kyle's expression remains blank, completely not amused with Stan's relaxed slur. Kyle is effectively stonewalling him in expression alone, but that's not the thing that causes disappointment to crinkle in his nose.

With another flick of the wall, Stan acknowledges his friend's stares, and responds by taking one final drag of his joint. He knows he's going to be pushed to snuff it out, and he's going to stop the trail of orders in their tracks.

"Dude."

"I know. I'm putting it out now."

"No, man, that's not--" Kyle cuts himself off in his tracks, his right hand coming up to pinch at the bridge of his nose and his eyes squeezing shut tight. Stan's not sure if that gesture is based in exhaustion, exasperation, annoyance, or if the smell of weed is just starting to hit him, but he doesn't have the energy to try and mentally differentiate between any of the options. "Stop."

It takes a moment for his hand to listen to the input of his brain, but he manages to halt the progression of putting out the lit end of the joint. Not being monitored, the smoke drifts further into Stan's bedroom, causing the air to heat and become thick like a fog. He's too caught up in the complexity and contradictions of his friend's expressions to care, though. Finally, Kyle's eyes open, and his hand slowly falls back to his side. Stan examines the contrast of his skin against the dark backdrop of his room.

"Can I try?"

"Try what?" asks Stan. "Putting it out? Fine, I don't care. Make like Beauty and be my guest."

Stan reaches over to hand the joint to Kyle, but stops when Kyle smacks his hand away. He recoils. Not a moment later, Kyle comes to realize exactly what he did, and his face reacts with the recognition of the moment. "Wait, no, shit." Stan watches as Kyle actively changes his mind, his hand shifting from its stiff, post-slapping-best-friend's-weed-away to a more relaxed outstretch for the joint.

Confused, Stan recoils further against the wall, lifting the joint above his head. It's a futile action to save it in the meantime of this argument of theirs, but he does nothing to stop the reflex. "Jesus Christ, Kyle. Make up your mind. Do you want the fucking thing or not?"

"I do, I--" Once again, Kyle stumbles to a premature stop in his speaking. If the lights were on, he would be able to see Kyle's cheeks develop a rosy glow of frustration. "Just- just give

it to me, dammit."

"Okay, I know you're a perfectionist, but I really think I can put out a joint more effectively than you can."

"Excuse me?"

"You've only ever smoked a cigarette, and remember when you tried to put it out? It burnt the fucking school down. Granted it was pretty sweet because we didn't have school for a while, but that isn't my point."

"Hey! You were there, too, you asshole." Kyle jabs a finger into the sternum of Stan. "And *you* were the one who suggested we throw them away."

"I didn't mean into a dumpster full of kindling," Stan defends, brushing Kyle's finger away from himself. Kyle's eyes widen, gaining a fire that's only ever really visible when he's in disbelief and edging on anger. His mouth is partially open, eyebrows lowered like his best friend just accused him of murder.

"Then why were we smoking next to a dumpster!"

Their faces are just inches away from each other at this point, and Kyle doesn't appear to be considering letting up in the slightest. His nostrils flare with a rush of emotion, his hands bracing himself on the bed on either side of Stan's legs so he doesn't fall face-first into Stan's chest. Within this moment that passes, the two boys simply stare at each other, buried in each other's respective anger and confusion. It's silent.

In the background, somewhere beyond Kyle's wild mess of red hair, Stan can pinpoint swirls and drifting of smoke near the ceiling. Absently, he lowers the joint and holds it just outside the window, trying to keep his room (and the house in general) as clear as possible.

Who was he to think smoking inside was a good idea?

"Listen, Stan. I just want to get high."

Stan doesn't say anything, his concentration torn between the thoughts of his parents finding out he's been raiding his dad's stash and the shock of Kyle actually drifting away from his best try at being a goody-two-shoes for his perfect little family. He surprises himself when his thoughts take on a bitter, almost jealous outlook. The moment reaches a peak, and he can no longer look his friend in the eyes. They both look away from each other. Kyle backs off, both physically and emotionally.

"Sorry."

The apology from Kyle doesn't cause Stan to say anything, or elicit any sort of response from him. It's heavy, the air inside the room; it's thick with emotional tension and drugs. Almost naturally, the boys slip into silence once more.

"I just wanted to... y'know. You seem to enjoy it, so..."

He simply listens, noticing how Kyle rubs his upper arms with the opposing hands. He's backpedaling, cold and trying to grasp at straws in an empty cup. The itching comes back, but instead of dragging again from his joint, Stan stays still. He's still a little too hung up on the sudden willingness from Kyle to smoke weed.

"I mean, I'll understand if you don't want to share. It is your weed, after all, and I don't want to push you, or anything, into letting me... use it. But, um..." Kyle drifts into a mumble, and Stan finally watches his friend's face, shifting in debate with himself. "...you offered, once. A while ago. And I don't regret not trying it then, because we were thirteen, or something, but I've been thinking about it, and I kind of want to try."

Is this insecurity he's seeing? Is Kyle afraid of rejection? It's not like either of them to be pussyfooting around any issues. They've both been headstrong and stubborn since they were kids, but Stan would have to give Kyle the award of being the most stubborn ass of either of them. The confidence he's used to seeing, though, isn't there. Stan scrambles for his own response.

Without thinking, Stan brings the joint back into his room. The smoke, although an important factor to him getting grounded, is something he's no longer worried about. He chooses to deal with the repercussions of any lingering smoke when the morning comes, and his parents decide to actually do something about it. Well, when his mom decides to do something about it.

"You sure, dude?"

Almost offended, Kyle retaliates. "If I wasn't sure, I wouldn't be bringing it up."

Stan can respect that. He examines the joint, still burning away in his hand. There's not a whole lot left, but he's willing to give Kyle a few of the final drags. He's not putting his money on Kyle sticking the journey out after his first huff, though. Thus, why he's not too worried. He holds the joint out to Kyle, tells him, "okay, then."

The redhead's expression falls, a relaxed wash of relief pouring from his lowered-guard body language. There's only a moment of hesitation, though it's easily brushed off as a well-placed pause, and he reaches for the joint. Stan pulls it away at the last moment. Kyle's offended posture comes back, brows knitting together and eyes flaming again. "Dude!"

"Before I give you this," Stan says, joint back into being held above his head. "I need you to solemnly swear that you won't blame me if you end up loving it, and ultimately become a total bad-boy stoner."

Kyle looks at Stan in utter disbelief.

"Come on, man. 'I solemnly swear...'"

"You sound like Cartman," Kyle blurts, upper lip curled in a display of teeth and defense. A venom, hardly audible and able to be acknowledged as a snap of poorly managed temper, is spat into Stan's veins. Almost automatically, Stan snorts a laugh. His response, itching in the pit of his gut, begins a fire somewhere in the back of his brain. He knows it's true.

Stan surrenders the joint to Kyle's desperate fingers, and watches when he stares at the joint. It's obvious that he's never done this before, not that it was ever a secret. He can only imagine how strange it must feel to break a promise to oneself like that. A squeaky clean record could be completely tarnished in a second, and the depth in Kyle's tense face allows Stan to recognize his internal struggle. "Are you sure about this?"

"I already told you, yes," Kyle says. His thumb brushes against the material of the joint in his fingers, and Stan can almost feel the smooth texture as well as Kyle must be able to. An empathetic thing, he assumes; a human thing.

Kyle lifts the joint to his lips, slow and full of contemplation of the idea of giving in to this odd desire. He's fine with brushing it off as a teenager thing-- a desperation to give his parents an indirect middle finger. His parents will never know, but it's the thought that counts, right? And then it's in his mouth, and he's breathing in smoke from burning leaves, and Stan is just watching him.

It begins as a tickle in his diaphragm, somewhere deep in himself, just beyond his chest. Before he can even remind himself to hold the smoke in his lungs, Kyle is coughing it out again. He holds the joint far away from himself, hiccuping in little, hacking coughs, his body unused to the idea of chemicals like this in him. There's a moment where Kyle is sure he's going to end up vomiting all over Stan's bedspread, but the moment passes as his body forces an inhale of oxygen. The thick air, the tension of unspoken emotion, causes him to force his breaths out in a few more coughs.

Touch shocks him. The hand on his back, surely just trying to soothe him into being able to breathe like a normal human being again, is unexpected and doesn't allow him to breathe in. He doesn't notice that the joint is gone from his fingers at first, though when he calms down enough to analyze what's going on, he finds that he really doesn't give a damn about where the joint was.

The blue numbers on the clock read "2:48". They're still unnervingly bright in the now quiet room, but at this point, Stan's eyes have gotten used to the comparative juxtaposition of monochrome and bursts of electrical color. His hand hasn't moved from its place on Kyle's back, even though he stopped coughing a solid ninety seconds ago. The itching of another drag from his joint pulled at Stan's gut, and he had taken one final drag (ignoring the saliva from Kyle's improper use) before pressing it out on a chunk of a cinder block that he kept on his windowsill. Stan let the joint stay there for now.

His high was still going, allowing him to feel still in the earth as time passed by like a roller coaster around him. Stan was in the center of it all, not moving and basking in the light of a moon's reflection on snow, cascading into his room to light up just the barest corner of his bed. Kyle's white shirt and face caught and reflected the blue light of the clock like he was snow, and it was the moon, and Stan was his bedroom, catching the reflection of the reflection.

It was all so very quiet. So, so very quiet; Stan was unsure of whether he could take it or not. The same piece of him that wants to kick and scream at his father's personalized version of alcoholism, and the same piece of him that became caught up in two different uses of speech, and the same piece of him that craves becoming one with his own breathing, craves silence

and stillness and freedom to simply lay. But majority rules over minority, and majority can't take the quiet.

"Are you okay?" He asks, snapping the silence. He almost cringes at the break of his voice, knowing it was probably grating on Kyle's ears. It grated on his own. His throat swallows itself in regrets.

"I'm fine."

And Kyle's voice is soft, a whisper that's loud enough to be a yell in such the silent room. It doesn't grate on Stan's ears, and Stan doesn't think it grates on Kyle's, either. The confirmation does little to make Stan move, though. His hand remains, still, on Kyle's back. He aches to press his ear to the place where his hand is, to listen to the breathing of Kyle's lungs. He craves to listen to purity.

"Are you okay?"

Stan stumbles in his thoughts, caught off-guard by the question-- his own question-- being thrown at him.

He says nothing, for a good minute or so. The digital clock jerks to "2:50", the angles of the light and shadows clipping through pieces of Kyle's hair.

Stan says, "I'm fine," and listens to the sound of Kyle's sharp exhale of acknowledgement. There's no way the two of them don't smell like weed. Kyle barely had any, but Stan knows his own smoking was enough to stick to it all. His attempts to keep it out the window were no more than for appearances, and he knows it. They both do. "You smell like weed. Your mom's gonna freak."

Kyle's pale hand comes up to mess with the hem of his shirt. He's almost nervous in the way he holds himself, messing with the fabric and running it over the sides and tips of his fingers. He tugs the cotton shirt around his fist. "I'll shower and change before I leave, if that's okay with you."

It's Stan's turn to exhale sharply. "Won't it be a little suspicious if you come home wearing the same clothes you left in?"

"I brought an extra change of clothes," Kyle says. He twists the shirt over his fist again, lifting his head to look at Stan. His eyes speak to him, but it's too quiet for any interpretation. They look at each other, wondering what they're thinking. This moment feels like it will never pass, contradicting eyes examining and connecting on a basic human level. The boys are reminded of their friendship. Kyle is reminded of the days of childhood. Stan is reminded of Kyle's usual packing list.

Stan says, "you planned this."

And Kyle says, "yeah."

Chapter End Notes

Man. This definitely was not my best work. I'll blame it on the fact that I rarely write third-person, lol.

Anyway, hopefully this was a bearable read. Constructive criticism/feedback is always welcomed!

Cheers! :)

Follow Him

Chapter Summary

The noise that erupted from Kyle's throat after he realized he wasn't getting anywhere reminded Stan way too much of a lion being held back from ripping apart its prey.

A cloud moved to cover the sun, and as such, the patch of Earth surrounding Stan and his small group of friends darkened. The air was full of neighborhood kids screaming (old and young), the miscellaneous hissing cat, and the smacking of a cold basketball against another boy's thick frame. It'd be funny, Stan was sure, if the resulting reaction weren't a loud, cringe-inducing, "*AY!*"

Although the worn, bruised, and slightly discolored ball had long since hit the ground, there was absolutely nothing stopping Eric Cartman from throwing a hissy fit.

"Fucking jeez, *Kyle!* What the fuck was that for?" Eric shouted as he rubbed his fingertips against his meaty shoulder. His brows tilted down and inwards, his mouth pursing as if tasting something sour. Kyle picked the basketball up from where it was now aimlessly rolling along the uneven tarmac of the South Park basketball court.

"What the hell are you asking me for?" Kyle asked, swapping the ball between the palms of either hand. He lingered for a few seconds on each palm, competing with himself in a half-assed, ball-balancing competition. "I wasn't the one who threw it."

"Oh, right, like I'll believe that," Eric scoffed. He jabbed his right index finger in the air towards Kyle accusingly. "Knowing you and your jewish ways, you probably *told* Stan to throw it while I wasn't looking!"

Kyle's expression changed. He pressed his palms against either side of the basketball, rolling it roughly between his hands. "I did not!"

"Fuck you, *Kyle!* You're a sly, daywalker bastard, *Kyle!*"

Kyle's grip on the basketball tightened significantly. Stan could see the divots made in the (previously fully-inflated) object, slowly being deepened by his friend's palms. He looked warily at the ball as he said, "uh, guys, maybe we should, like. Not – "

"I'm not a daywalker, you fat fuck!" Kyle shouted.

Of course they didn't listen to him. It wasn't like Stan had expected to be heard over the pure tension that was sparking through the air. Eric stomped his foot petulantly, his fists curling in contempt. "That's exactly what a daywalker would say, goddammit!"

“God! You're impossible!”

“Says you! You're more complicated than Wendy, and she's a girl!”

Stan couldn't help but bristle for that comment about his girlfriend. Even so, he didn't otherwise react. The protective feeling died off as rapidly as it had begun.

And just like that, Kyle was back to shouting. “Don't pull that sexist crap on me, shit for brains!”

“Sexist? How was that sexist? That wasn't fucking sexist, it was fucking true, fucking *god!*”

“I'd tell you to get a more extensive vocabulary, but you can't even spell the word '*chair!*'” Kyle's nails scraped against the basketball's surface.

“Fourth grade, Kyle! Fourth grade!” Eric exclaimed. “And it wasn't even my fault! The stupid monkey was defective! All he did was jack off!”

“What the fuck are you *talking about*, Cartman!”

“The fucking Hooked on Monkey Fonics monkey! My mom got the Hooked on Monkey Fonics thingy and – ” Eric's mouth failed to keep up with his brain, and he stumbled over multiple consonants and vowels before he finally shut himself up. He took a step forward. “ – and fuck you, *Kyahl!*”

That was it. That was the last straw. Kyle's eyes flashed with a fierce anger, his knuckles turning white from his grip on the basketball. “My name – ” Kyle began. “ – is *not* – ”

He drew the basketball up above his head, winding up to throw.

“ – '*Kyahl!*'”

Kyle pelted the basketball shamelessly at Eric's head. It connected with his face just a second later, causing a loud *thwack* to sound throughout the air. For a few seconds after the initial contact, the only sounds that could be heard in the immediate vicinity were the clipped, hollow noises of the basketball hitting the ground and rolling away.

Stan's eyes caught Kenny's from across the court. If there was one thing that had changed for certain in the years these boys had grown up, it would most definitely be Eric's stubbornness when faced with a fight. While previously he had been cowardly and self-aware enough to avoid getting in fights like it was some rendition of the plague, nowadays it was rare for Eric Cartman to pass up a fight. He wasn't particularly strong, but with all of that extra weight (some of which had transformed undeniably into muscle), it was difficult to beat him. The classic teenage “invincibility syndrome” hit him hard in eighth grade, and it had stuck around ever since.

Both Stan and Kenny knew this, and both of them were wary of the consequences of Kyle's impulsive actions.

As the blood rushed to Eric's face from the passing of such a sudden assault with a (possibly half-frozen) basketball, he drew his hands higher to his waist and quickly approached Kyle. "You piece of shit!" He exclaimed, muscles tensing in preparation for a fight. "I'll fucking kill you, jew-boy!"

"Fuck you, fatass! I'd like to see you try!" Kyle shouted in retort, his own stance adapting for conflict. He didn't get very far, though, as Eric was already lifting his hands to grip Kyle's jacket at the collar. It was a classic scene from a classic bully film, as far as Stan was concerned – especially as Eric drew his right hand back behind his head, gaining energy for a punch. Kyle scrambled his own hands up, smacking at Eric's chest with enough force to jolt him back. However, Eric's grip on Kyle was unrelenting.

Stan and Kenny leaped into action, rushing over to pull the two boys away from each other. Stan had to wrap his arms around Kyle's torso from behind, while Kenny helped by clawing Eric's hands from Kyle's shirt. Stan backed away with Kyle in his arms, watching as Kenny decided to take the more barrier-like approach, pushing himself between Kyle and Eric and doing his best to shove Eric backwards.

Both of the more passive boys held the two pissed-off aggressors at bay while they tried to put the situation back under control. All in all, it was not an easy job – especially with Stan's grip on his friend being a bit lacking. Kyle was lanky and flexible, easily able to squirm himself out of a tight spot. It was a miracle that Stan's arms had held out even for this short amount of time, really.

The noise that erupted from Kyle's throat after he realized he wasn't getting anywhere reminded Stan way too much of a lion being held back from ripping apart its prey.

"Let go of me, Stan!" Kyle shouted, trying one more attempted escape with a sudden burst of energy. Stan gripped the folds of Kyle's coat to keep him in place. "Fuck, dude! Who's side are you *on*?"

"Are you kidding me?" Stan replied. "Do I *really* have to answer that?"

Kyle grunted, his muscles finally beginning to loosen. "Let me hit him! God, damn it."

Kenny was having similar difficulties keeping Eric back from an attempt at manslaughter. He had resulted to jabbing his elbow into Eric's sternum. Each time, Eric recoiled and yelped loudly in protest. Kenny said nothing to Eric's outbursts, choosing to linger in the quiet that was much too common for him these days. The only thing truly saving Kenny from Eric's true wrath was his height. Although Eric often argued the opposite, it was fairly obvious that he was slightly intimidated by those who were taller than he was.

Eric thrashed his arms against Kenny's, hollering, "you wanna suffer, Kyle? Huh? You wanna fucking suffer? I think he wants to suffer, guys, he totally wants to suffer!"

"Cartman, do us all a favor and shut the fuck up," Stan said.

"Piss off, pussy-licker!" Eric exclaimed. "The only reason that lesbo Wendy stays with you is because you got no balls!"

Kyle's energy suddenly renewed itself, showing in the resurfacing of the tension in his muscles and the regained steady resistance against Stan. "Oh, you insufferable piece of muff – " Kyle cut himself off, face reddening with effort.

"Huh? What's that? What is that sweet, sweet birdsong I hear? Is that a Jersey-boy?" Eric asked. He wiped his brow with the back of his sleeve. He was no longer fighting against Kenny – he had given up, and was ready to call it quits. That didn't mean he had to cease insulting his sworn enemy, though, did it? "A Jersey-boy fighting his Jersey-ness. What a fun sound. And to think it's all thanks to your bitch mom, huh, Kyle?"

"Awh, you wish, motherfucking m – "

"Kyle, stop, let it go," said Stan. Experimentally, he loosened his grip on Kyle's jacket. Kyle immediately broke free, stumbling to the side. Although he was prepared and braced for a fistfight, he wasn't currently approaching Eric, so Stan gave him some physical space.

"Let it go!" Kyle shouted. A laugh escaped his throat, uncomfortable and angry. "Yes, Stan, I will just *let go* of the fact that this *asshole* just called my mom a *bitch*. *Again!*"

"C'mon, man. I don't think it's a good – "

"Oh, *you* don't think it's a good idea? *This dick* just won't quit but, oh no, we should just *call off everything* because *you* don't think it's a *good idea!*" Kyle snapped. His face was beginning to slip into a shade of red that rivaled his hair. To protect himself, Stan lifted his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"Okay, okay, jeez, I was just – "

"Alright, that's it, everybody shut the fuck up!" Kenny shouted.

And everyone did.

Stan turned to face Kenny, whose own face was beginning to redden. His expression was sharp and impatient, brows furrowed in agitation. The palm of his right hand was pressed against the center of Eric's chest, supposedly keeping the wider boy from attacking at any moment. Eric, however, seemed more intrigued with his fingernails.

There was immediate relief as everyone finally stopped talking. It was now that Stan was able to just chill for a minute, and listen to the simple sounds of South Park. The playful shouts of children at the nearby park had died down since their own exclamations, and the basketball had been tossed safely aside, no longer able to be used for nefarious purposes.

Kyle's chest heaved in the effort of his attempts to free himself, his breaths coming out as hollow panting in the sudden calm. Stan's own breathing wasn't quiet, though for a different reason. His airways whistled with every exhale.

As the silence fell upon the four boys, Kenny finally spoke up.

"Y'all are being fucking stupid," he said. "Like, full-on retarded stupid."

In the quiet, no one missed Eric's muttered comment of, "that's interesting, coming from the poor white trash."

Stan had to give kudos to Kenny for being able to brush those comments off so easily. He shot a look to Kyle. The redhead's gaze was turned down towards the tarmac, the soles of his shoes scraping against the basketball court's artificial ground. "Cartman, you're a piece of shit," Kenny said. This comment was surprising enough to get Eric to fall speechless. Apparently satisfied with this, Kenny turned to Kyle. "We all know Cartman's a piece of shit, too. And he totally deserves getting beat on with the wrath of, like, ten thousand flamin' hot Cheetos, but – dude. That doesn't mean it's okay to throw people under the bus for revenge, y'know?"

Kyle soured. "Who was I throwing under the – "

"Yourself, dude," Kenny answered.

Kyle lifted his head, puzzled.

Kenny drew in a breath, continuing. "You gotta learn to acknowledge the fact that your body ain't gonna just. Reappear, all totally fine and shit, after you beat the ever-loving crap out of this guy, because. No offense, but. Cartman's got, like, a hundred pounds on you. You wouldn't expect to run up to a sumo wrestler and just be totally fine afterwards, would you?"

Stan and Kyle snickered, but Eric was bent on reassuring himself with the, "I'm not fat, I'm just big-boned," statement.

"The answer is no. You wouldn't. Same goes here. Cartman's dumb, but you're an idiot if you can't see the harm you're gonna cause if you try to get into fisticuffs with other dudes, and shit."

"I'm not weak, Kenny," Kyle argued.

"Oh, trust me, I know." Kenny bared his teeth and picked something from between his central and lateral incisors. It was a strangely casual action for a situation such as this. "You, as a person, are ridiculously strong. Hardheaded, 'n shit. But, man, your body would beg to differ."

Kyle fell silent.

"Just some food for thought, man, but hey. It's your life, right? Go ahead and beat up as many fatasses as you want, I guess." Kenny wiped his hand on his left pant leg. His eyes lifted up and caught with Stan's, and then they drifted over to Kyle. They gave each other a minuscule, mutual nod, and settled it with that. Kenny segued quickly, looking to Eric. "Speakin' of fatasses, c'mon, dude. We're going to KFC, and you're buying."

"Wh – I'm *what* now? Excuse me, when did I consent to this?" Eric asked, coming dangerously close to pouting.

"Just now," said Kenny, smug. He looked at Stan. "Y'all coming?"

Stan opened his mouth to reply, but Kyle beat him to the punch. “No. We're going home.”

For the final time in that night, Kenny and Stan made eye contact. “Well. Okay, then. Suit yourself.”

And that was that.

Kenny turned on his heel and practically dragged Eric the first couple of feet away from the court, but soon afterwards, they were out of sight. A very small piece of Stan was disappointed that he couldn't go with, but after dealing with that conflict just a few minutes earlier, he was exhausted. Fully, totally, infallibly, exhausted. Something within his shoulders slumped, and his brain slumped with it.

Stan looked to Kyle, drawing his breath out in a prolonged wheeze, before he began to talk. “So. I'll see y – ”

“Are your parents home?” Kyle blurted.

Confused, Stan asked, “what?”

“Your parents. Are they home?”

“Uh,” Stan muttered. “No? They're at some theater... *thing* in Denver this weekend, or whatever. I don't know. I didn't want specifics – ”

Kyle reached over and grabbed Stan's sweater sleeve. His fingers pinched the fabric carefully, making sure not to leave any sort of mark. It was different from normal. Kyle's voice contrasted his mannerisms, practically leaking confidence from every syllable. “Good. We're getting high.”

“... huh?”

“You heard me,” Kyle said. “We're going to go to your place, and you're gonna grab your weed, and we're gonna get as high as a fucking kite.”

Stan couldn't help but feel the surprise rock over him like waves from an ocean. His brain wrecked itself trying to understand where Kyle's mind was, but for the life of him, he just couldn't. He was too exhausted. Kyle tugged, gentle, on Stan's sleeve.

“Now, Stan. Let's go before we freeze our asses off out here.”

The Boy

Chapter Summary

His heart pounded.

Although he wasn't expecting to come home so soon, Stan had kept his door unlocked from when he left earlier that morning. His parents would have a conniption fit if they knew, but that was a perk of having parents that were out of town for the weekend. With his sister in college, he got the house to himself. He didn't have to worry about the regular shit that would piss someone off. Not until late Sunday night, at least.

Stan hooked his elbow over the top of the door handle and rolled his arm. The knob got caught in a crease within his sweater, and with the movement, it caused the lock to click open just enough for him to nudge the door ajar with his foot. It was vastly more difficult than simply opening the door with his hand, but that would involve removing one of his hands from his pockets. He didn't want to do that.

Kyle stepped in after he did, taking care of the open door. He leaned his shoulder against it as he worked to neatly step out of his shoes, being a stark difference to Stan, who simply kicked them off towards the corner. Although Stan knew this was a weird time to compare himself to his friend, he couldn't help it. That moment, right there – that little thing, was so very indicative of the two differing households they had grown up in.

Within that moment, Stan felt isolated.

“So, do people actually get the munchies? Is that a real thing?” Kyle asked, tucking his shoes next to Stan'ss. He stood with a straight posture, his unzipped jacket hanging off of him like it didn't belong anymore. Stan looked away.

“Yeah. I mean, not everyone does, obviously, but it does happen,” Stan replied. He shuffled towards the kitchen, socks scraping against the carpeting of the living room. It was a vastly unpleasant noise, but he couldn't bring himself to lift his feet higher – or care very much, for that matter. The strain on his ears quickly vanished when he reached the kitchen tiles.

The cabinets directly across from the kitchen's entryway were his dad's hiding spot. It was a shit hiding spot, especially since that was where most of their nice china was kept, but Stan's mom had yet to find it hidden in the back, just behind the gravy boat they had received from her great grandmother twice removed – or, if she had, she hadn't said anything about it.

Stan tugged the door open. His knees ached as he lowered himself closer to the floor, his posture slouched and utterly poor. Although he knew he just needed to reach in and grab

some of his dad's stash, he couldn't. He couldn't stop staring at the little porcelain gravy boat, and he couldn't stop thinking about what exactly he was going to do.

Get his friend high? Really? What is he, a drug dealer?

This is shit, Stan told himself as he reached into the cabinet. His palm knocked against a stack of plates, which caused a small, shivering noise to echo inside of the confined space. His fingers brush against a pill bottle. A glance to the label is enough to confirm the fact that this is the shit he's doing. This is what he's doing on his weekend. He's not doing homework, or sleeping in, or having fun with his friends like he used to. He's not groaning about baseball, or going to Canada, or learning to accept his gay dog – no.

Stan Marsh is getting his childhood friend *high* – and *why*? Because Kyle *told* him this is what they were doing?

“This is *shit*,” Stan repeated, this time aloud. He yanked the pill bottle full of his stupid dad's stupid weed out of the kitchen cabinet, kicked the door shut with his right heel, and forced himself up from the floor with a single heave. His exit from the kitchen was swift, and although his heart was pumping ice through his veins, he didn't even think of looking back towards refusal.

The steps he had been taking simply ceased when he noticed Kyle at the table just underneath the main window in the living room. He was slouched over, palms on his knees, staring at this digital picture frame his mom had set up yesterday. It swapped randomly between miscellaneous pictures of Stan, Shelley, Randy, and Sharon – scattered in there were pictures from Kyle's Facebook page, of Stan and Kyle doing things like going to the Denver Zoo, or going for food with Kenny, Cartman, and Craig's gang.

Stan's pulse erupted in his ears as he watched Kyle's shoulders shake in a gentle laugh. He craned his neck to peek over his shoulder at the picture – one of Stan and Kyle when they were about eleven, both with casts on their right arms. Their childhood selves were giving the camera a thumbs-up, cheerful faces frozen in the digital memory.

“That's a cute picture,” said Kyle, seemingly more to himself than anyone else. Stan sidled up next to Kyle, obsessively tapping the cap of the pill bottle in his right hand. Fabric shifted as Kyle looked over to Stan. His cheeks, rosy from the cold, were developing up into a smile that Stan painfully returned – and then the moment was over, and Kyle was over it quicker than Stan was comfortable with. “Okay. We ready to do this?”

There was an inability that budded up in Stan's chest, rising up his throat and tumbling through his brain in waves. He wasn't entirely sure what the inability was, but it was there, and it was debilitating. His heart pounded.

Kyle's eyes caught Stan's as he brushed his palms across the portion of his jacket that covered his hips. A lull occurred in the house. “You...” Something within Kyle's face ended up falling. “You okay? You out of weed, or something?”

Stan swallowed and said, “nah. We're good.”

“Oh. Good.”

Kyle plopped himself down on the couch, and Stan sat next to him. He knew that they shouldn't smoke here, but his parents were out anyway, so what the hell, right? Why the fuck not.

The throwing of all caution to the wind didn't allow Stan's mind to quit reeling in the slightest, though, and it didn't keep him from staying away from hesitation. His fingernails clicked against the serrated plastic on the pill bottle's cap. It was a needlessly useless fidget, but it was a way to get the nerves out of his system before he decided to get high.

If there was one thing that Stan had discovered in the past five years, it was that he should never get high while nervous in the way he is now. He had made that mistake more than once before, and every single time, it ended horribly. The world twisted into this unimaginably menacing place when he got fucked up while nervous. Stan didn't want to deal with the menacing side of the world right now.

Suddenly, Kyle asked, “do you get it?” and Stan was reeling at the sudden question. His brain struggled to make the connection between the situation, and whatever Kyle was referencing.

“Get what?” Stan responded.

“*The munchies*,” Kyle said, his tone insistent – bordering on frustrated. Contrarily, he elbowed Stan's right side playfully. What was with that lately, anyway? Why was there such a divide between his body language and his *literal* language?

“Oh,” he mumbled. “Well. Sometimes, sure. Yeah.”

“What's it feel like?”

Needless to say, Stan was puzzled by Kyle's obsession with the munchies, but indulged him anyway. “I don't know. Mostly weird. Like, forcefully artificial in the best way possible, while also being absolutely awful. It makes you act like a pregnant lady.”

“Wha...” Kyle's expression screwed itself up, staring at Stan in a weird semblance of bemusement. “Dude, what does that even *mean*?”

Stan pursed his lips, drumming his fingertips against the side of the pill bottle. The prescription was made out to **MARSH**, though the first name had been crossed out with a thick, black marker. “Y'know how a symptom of pregnancy is weird food cravings?” Stan looked over to Kyle. When Kyle nodded, he continued. “It's like... similar to that, but it's not like you're *craving* weird things, specifically, it's just that it ends up... *being* weird things.”

Kyle hummed somewhere deep in his throat, his head bobbing in a nod. “Ah, okay... that makes absolutely no sense, but sure.”

“Okay.” Stan shifted backwards, pressing his back against the backrest of the couch. He stared up at the ceiling. “Here's an example. I got high as fuck one night, and I was hungry.

Very hungry, for pretty much anything I could get my hands on. So I went down into the kitchen, I raided the fridge, and I ended up wrapping mango in Kraft Singles cheese.”

His friend's expression changed to one of horror.

“And,” Stan added, “it was fucking fantastic, at the time.”

“Eh – ” Kyle's voice cut off after the syllable. He turned away from Stan and removed his hat, just so he could run his fingers through his hair. He breathed out. “*Excuse* – how the hell could you defile cheese like that?”

Stan snorted. “You're worried about defiling *the cheese*?”

“Well, yeah!” Kyle threw his hands up into the air, letting them plop down into his lap. “Mango can go fuck itself.”

“Dude, what did mango ever do to you?”

The flush that settled on Kyle's face was indicative enough of the story to come, but it simply fueled Stan's curiosity. Kyle's nonchalant response of, “nothing,” did very little to sate Stan's questioning.

“Oh, uh, no. This sounds like a story, Kyle,” Stan responded, rolling his shoulders back. He listened for a moment, but when Kyle said absolutely nothing in response, Stan held up the pill bottle and added, “C'mon, Kyle. Show me on the bottle where the mango touched you.”

Kyle's reaction was slightly stronger than Stan had been expecting. The main display was a bristling, tensed posture that Stan could only assume was defensive. He shoved Stan's shoulder, apparently offended by something in his statement. “Fuck off, man,” he said. Stan just snickered.

That's when the silence began to creep up on the boys. It was so quiet, that Stan swore he was able to hear the digital picture frame swapping from picture to picture. He could definitely hear the clock on the wall opposite them, and he could hear some water running in some pipes somewhere in the house, but otherwise, it was overwhelmingly quiet. His ears were ringing. There's a name for that, he's sure, but it had escaped him in the moment.

A sniff came from beside Stan, and he looked over to Kyle. His friend's posture was slouched uncharacteristically low, his fingers tugging anxiously at his ushanka. The hat rested, crumpled in his lap. Stan's eyes caught Kyle's wild mess of red hair, and he wanted to...

Stan looked away.

“Well, are you going to make a blunt, or whatever?”

Stan didn't correct him. “Yeah, just...”

“Just *what*?” Kyle snapped, his hat wrinkling with his tightened grip. Stan said nothing in response for a moment.

“Are you okay?” He finally asked. Kyle didn't reply, simply staring incredulously at Stan, like he had just developed the audacity to sprout a second head. Kyle opened his mouth to respond, his lips parting just the slightest bit –

But then, he closed his mouth, and looked away. Stan decided to change the course of the conversation.

“I'm just asking because I don't want you to have a bad high.”

Kyle furrowed his brows.

“So, if you're not okay, we can just chill for a sec, until you get your mood up a little more.” It was just a suggestion, but Kyle's face softened nonetheless.

“I'm not okay,” said Kyle.

Stan nodded and asked, “how can I help?”

“You can't,” Kyle responded. Although some of the tension within his shoulders decreased, his fingers worked tenfold on the fidgeting, anxious grip he had on his hat. “I'd just like to feel not-okay for a bit, if that's okay.”

“Yeah.” Stan settled into the cushions of the couch, and said, “I'll be here with the weed when you're ready.”

Ten Thousand Hearts

Chapter Summary

“That's really fucking gay, dude,” Stan replied.

Chapter Notes

imma regret posting this aren't i
im so sorry and hopefully this isn't totally awful.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Stan knew Kyle was high when he started laughing for no apparent reason.

It wasn't just a casual laugh, either – it was this deep, full sound that came from somewhere within his abdomen. The sound rang in his ears, cascaded over his skin, and within that moment, Stan felt like he was melting. That's the only way he could describe it. He was melting in Kyle's hearty laughter, responding to every wheeze and snort with a breath of air into his own lungs.

The room smelled strongly like weed, which wasn't surprising in the least. Such is the consequence of lighting a joint in an enclosed space, right? The thought of opening a window to get some fresh air into the house drifted through his mind. Ultimately, though, Stan couldn't bring himself to slide off the couch and over to the window to open it. A piece of him was paranoid that the neighbors would listen to them and their high conversation, anyway. They had yet to really start a conversation since getting high, but if they did start to talk, the window would be open, and people would listen in, and they'd know everything, and they'd be against him, they'd all be against him, it's all they want, info against him dirt on him *covering him burying him until he's –*

Stan drew in a deep breath, allowing his muscles to relax against the couch cushions. He dropped his head back against the couch. In the moment, he chose to focus on the popcorn ceiling just above them. The little shadows created by the little bumps made an odd texture that swam in his brain. He wondered if Kyle saw it, too.

To check, Stan rolled his head to the side, staring down at his friend. Since getting high, Kyle had ended up adopting a laying down position on the couch, having little to no regard for Stan's own comfort. Stan didn't mind very much, however, and allowed Kyle to drape himself across Stan's lap in whichever way he pleased. For now, he had slid himself down a bit, only his calves splayed over Stan's thighs. Kyle's ankles twitched every so often, and Stan wasn't

sure if that was due to a lingering jittery anxiousness, or if it was simply the occasional muscle spasm. Either way, every time it happened, Stan noticed. He counted.

Kyle's laughter faded into a quiet chuckle, and then adapted itself into an airy giggle. Stan still wasn't sure what he found so funny, exactly, but he wasn't about to burst his bubble to the fact that nothing was happening. Maybe this was the escape he needed.

It was definitely the escape Stan needed.

"Dude," Kyle mumbled. Stan waited for him to say something else, but he didn't.

"Yep," Stan replied. Kyle's left ankle twitched. *That'd be thirteen.*

There was a small lull that settled over them. And then, Kyle spoke up once more, saying, "duuude." Stan found it funny that Kyle sounded like the stereotypical stoner. He chuckled to himself, splaying his palm across Kyle's right shin. He spread his fingers, feeling the fabric of the jeans over his friend's leg. That was all it took to get Kyle giggling again.

"Kyle, are you happy?" Stan asked. Kyle lifted his hands to his face, snorting into his palm. His breathing drew long and languid, his laughter similarly relaxed. It was peaceful. Nonetheless, Kyle ended up dodging his question. Whether or not that was intentional, Stan had no idea, but he tried not to obsess over whatever consequences that might entail.

"Dude," Kyle said for a third time. He scooted down the couch so his head fell from the arm onto one of the cushions, and his thighs now touched Stan's. "This is great."

"Yep," Stan replied. His cheek pressed against his shoulder, posture slouched enough for that to be comfortable. When had he adapted this position? Was there a reason for Kyle's initial laughter? What was going through his head? Was this a random outburst? When had Kyle's wrists gotten so thin? Whatever. "Why are you laughing, anyway?"

Kyle stretched his arms up over his head, his sleeves cascading down his forearms just slightly more than they should. "This is gonna sound stupid," he responded. His tongue peeked out from inside of his mouth, brushing against the cracking, stress-torn skin of his lips. "But I don't even remember."

Stan only responded with a simple hum of acknowledgment, and a slightly tightened grip on his friend's right shin. Kyle didn't seem to notice, however – and if he did, he didn't show it.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Stan wondered what time it was. The sun had yet to go down, so he could only assume it was mid-noon, at the latest. Even with how early he knew it must be, he couldn't help the fact that his eyelids were slowly dropping as comfort washed over him. He felt like he was breathing with bubbles. Could lungs be considered bubbles? That's either a really good question, or a really stupid question.

"Hey." Stan bumped Kyle's ankle with his wrist, trying to get his attention. Kyle grumbled something unintelligible under his breath, draping an arm across his eyes. "Hey. Kyle."

"Huh?" Kyle huffed.

“Lungs. D'you think they could technically be considered bubbles?”

Kyle removed his arm from his eyes, as if the statement had totally thrown him for a loop. His eyes searched through the ceiling for a moment – then they widened, and he pushed himself up on his elbows. “What?”

“Could lungs be considered bubbles?”

He seemed to think on this, eyes blinking slowly as his they let in the light from the window. “Uhh... no. Bubbles are liquid.”

All Stan said in response to that was, “oh.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Kyle dropped himself back down onto the couch, the back of his head resting on one of the small pillows. Stan watched as he slowly got comfortable again. He watched as Kyle's hat slid forward on his forehead, covering his eyes with green fabric. He watched as Kyle's breathing steadied – watched his chest rise and fall with the intake of oxygen. He felt the muscles in Kyle's legs relax against his thighs.

As the redhead relaxed, Stan fidgeted with the hem of Kyle's right pant leg. He listened as Kyle's breath came rushing out in a continuation of the soft hum he had let out earlier. The single note eventually transformed into a slow, smooth series of notes – some of which were probably off-kilter somewhere, but Stan didn't mind. It was an interesting melody that naturally wavered in some places, the way that English songs don't. Stan couldn't say he'd ever heard it before – and no, he couldn't tell if that was *really* unfamiliarity talking, or if it was just the weed.

Time passed. Stan wasn't sure how much time passed, but time passed, and Kyle was still laying there, legs in his lap and throat constricting dryly around the melody he was humming. Something fired in Stan's brain – a collective group of neurons, or some shit, and Stan suddenly realized he found Kyle's absentminded humming beautiful.

Fuck. Stan's definitely high.

“What're you humming?” Stan asked. Kyle abruptly ceased his humming, much to the displeasure of his friend.

“A song,” Kyle responded descriptively. Stan would roll his eyes if that didn't involve so much effort.

“No shit,” he said. Kyle's ankle twitched again. *Fourteen*. “What song?”

“I dunno. A song.” Kyle reached up to spread his hands over his face again, his tongue making another appearance from between his lips. “My mouth is too dry to say the words right. The weed ruined the ecosystem of my... face.”

Stan laughed.

“I’m being serious!” Kyle exclaimed. He pushed himself up on his elbows once more, his spine slouched in a way that couldn’t possibly be comfortable for him. He pushed his tongue out of his mouth again, softly smacking his lips to try and gain more saliva. “That’s a downside to weed. My mouth is a desert. My teeth might as well be fucking tumbleweeds.”

“Ha! Tumbleweeds,” Stan echoed. “Get it, because – ”

“Weed,” Kyle finished. He shut his eyes, finally closing his mouth properly. “So much weed.”

“It wasn’t *that* much weed,” said Stan. “It was just a little. You’re a lightweight.”

“Says the guy who’s been doing this for five years. Come on. You’ve probably built up a tolerance more expansive than the Great Wall of China,” Kyle retorted. “But instead of keeping out the Mongolians, you’re keeping out the... weed chemical. The shit that gets you high.”

“I thought you were in AP chemistry,” Stan said.

“I am! But it’s not like we learn about weed.”

“Still.” Stan lifted his ass off of the couch for a second, adjusting his seat. Kyle lifted his legs in response, allowing Stan to get comfortable before laying his legs right back where they had been. “*Weed chemical.*”

Kyle rolled his eyes. “Oh, fuck you.”

“That should be your senior quote. *I got high on weed chemical.*”

And that broke the dam. The giggling mess of a redhead was back, slumping backwards against the pillows. His breathing cracked with every exhale. This time, Stan laughed with him. “You’re so stupid!” Kyle exclaimed through broken chuckles. His hands came to rest over his diaphragm, and Stan watched as Kyle tried to get himself back under control.

Their chuckles trickled down into quiet once more. The occasional snort would cause them to crack up again, but only for a few seconds at a time – otherwise, it was back to being calm. It was back to being still. It was back to being quiet.

Stan’s eyes traveled to where Kyle had his hands, resting now over his chest. His friend’s eyes were turned up towards the ceiling, his lips parted slightly in comfort, and his breath coming in and out deeply, with a set rhythm. In that moment, something within Stan stirred. He couldn’t figure it out, and most of him didn’t want to, but within that moment, it was there. This urge, this sentiment, this wish to lay over Kyle and press his ear to his chest and listen to the oxygen draw in and out of his lungs.

“Can I listen to you breathe?”

The words were out before Stan had the conscious mind to keep himself from speaking.

Kyle shifted, his brows furrowed.

“What?” He asked. Stan prayed to God and all that was holy that Kyle hadn't heard him – that this was a “*what*” of “*I didn't hear you, what was that you said*” and not a “*what*” of “*what the hell did you just say*”.

Backtracking, Stan answered with, “nothing. I'm high.” He scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair, trying to refresh himself into a bit of a livelier state. If he were to be honest, he felt just about half dead. The world was slow and unbelievably bright, and the thing he wanted most in this moment was to crawl into bed and sulk in embarrassment.

“I'm okay with it,” Kyle said.

Stan peered over at him through the cracks between his fingers. “What?” he asked.

“I'm okay with it. You have my consent. Yes, you may listen to me breathe.”

Neither of them moved for a moment. Hell, it felt like neither of them *breathed* for a moment. The atmosphere was still, stiff, hot, and heavy, weighting down their shoulders in only the way air can. The smell of weed in the room was overwhelmingly strong, now, even though Stan was pretty sure it hadn't increased at all in the past ten minutes.

Stan rubbed his eyes.

“Are... you serious?” Stan asked.

“If I wasn't serious, I wouldn't have said yes.”

Stan swallowed a quiet, “okay.”

Stan did most of the moving. He even lifted Kyle's legs for him, even though he was sure he didn't exactly have to. He stood from his seat and draped them casually across the couch, where he had been sitting, and – he just stared. At his friend, at his friend's arms, at his friend's legs. Kyle began to fidget when he became uncomfortable, and he slowly shifted himself up so his neck was supported by the arm of the couch again. Stan slowly settled himself over top of Kyle.

It was difficult to find the position, but they both eventually settled together. Kyle, with a pillow propped between his head and the arm of the couch – Stan, laying on his stomach on top of Kyle, his right ear pressed against the center of his friend's chest.

Kyle's hips splayed open, cradling Stan's sides, so his legs weren't caught underneath Stan.

Stan swore he was able to hear everything in that moment. He could hear Kyle's heartbeat, he could hear Kyle's inhales and exhales, he could hear Kyle swallow – for a minute there, Stan would bet his life that he had actually heard Kyle blinking. Stan could hear it all, and Stan listened to it all, and Stan would easily be able to fall asleep to the gentle rhythm Kyle's body held just so he could exist. It was a natural lullaby.

Just as his breath had begun to even out, and just as his muscles began to let go of the very last bit of tension he had held within them, Kyle reached up with his left hand and began to gently play with Stan's hair.

Stan's heart and lungs did a thing.

“Have you...” Kyle paused for a moment, his fingers gently stilling. “...ever wondered what it'd be like to kiss a boy?”

Stan's heart and lungs flipped with the discomfort of a different thing. He pushed himself up onto his knees so he could look into Kyle's eyes. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said. And Kyle was right. Stan had heard him, loud and clear. From the base of his chest to the part of his lips, he had heard Kyle's question.

“That's really fucking gay, dude,” Stan replied.

“I didn't mean it in a gay way.”

“Still sounded pretty fucking gay to me.”

This caused Kyle to roll his eyes, slipping his hands out of Stan's hair in favor of crossing them smoothly over his chest. “Oh, shut the fuck up.”

As Kyle averted his eyes from Stan completely, he fell utterly silent. They both did, really, and Stan's chest squeezed in a rougher version of the earlier thing. This look, he was sure, was a look of disappointment. Embarrassment, at the very least. Something shameful echoed within himself, and Stan wondered if he had just lied. He wondered if it was now too awkward for him to continue this position – he was caging Kyle in with his arms, and his cheeks were flaming in discomfort – yet he couldn't bring himself to move.

“So, have you?” Kyle asked.

Caught off-guard again, Stan responded with, “have I what?”

“Wondered about kissing boys.”

“No,” Stan answered. After a beat, he decided to return the question. “Have you?”

Kyle said, “no.”

“Okay.”

Stan adjusted himself, his palms dragging against the fabric of the couch. After the second to himself, just to breathe, just to collect himself, just to take a minute away from any potential expectations, he looked back over to Kyle.

“You wanna try?”

The question was met with only silence for a moment. Although nervous in that he could have just totally fucked something up here, Stan steeled himself from the outside world and its implications. Finally, Kyle said, “okay.”

Kyle's left ankle twitched against Stan's leg. *Fifteen.*

Neither boy did anything. Although they had both agreed that they were going to try this thing – this thing that both of them had claimed to have never once wondered about – they were hesitating. This was hesitation, Stan was sure, and equally as such, this was awkward.

Something twisted within his gut as they looked at each other. Thoughts of Wendy and how she would react to this crept in through the dusty corners of his brain. Was this – no. No, this wasn't. He wasn't technically cheating, because, c'mon. This is *Kyle*. It's not as if they like each other that way. He boiled it down to nerves. Stan had only ever kissed Wendy, and that wasn't a secret. Kyle was there for most of those kisses in early elementary, and each and every time, Stan had vomited. He took that as more proof that this wasn't cheating, because it was just a kiss, and he didn't like Kyle like that, and he didn't feel like he would vomit at the very notion of pressing his lips to Kyle's.

Because that's all it'd be. A press of lips.

Stan leaned in first, because, why not? He had nothing to lose.

He was right. It was only lips against lips, skin against skin, flesh on flesh – and it wasn't all that great. There was no crawling, slithering snake of appeal that wrapped itself around him, like when he would kiss Wendy on a date. There was no attraction, or excitement.

But even so, they stayed like that, breathing through each other's air.

And suddenly, it was something.

Kyle's tongue darted out against Stan's lip, and in response, Stan shifted most of his weight onto his left elbow and his knees. His right hand lifted against Kyle's cheek. The side of his thumb spread gently across the skin. The only thing he could think as he did this was *soft*. Kyle was *soft*. Kyle was *pliable*. Kyle was *responsive*.

When the two of them were this close, Stan noticed Kyle's scent. Kyle smelled of a campfire, and tasted of the smoke, and Stan felt like a marshmallow being roasted in such a comfortable way, it shocked him.

Kyle leaned back. Stan leaned forward, chasing, wanting, *needing* –

They didn't pull away from the kiss until Stan needed air, and even then it was hard to call it “pulling away”. It was more just a shift up for breath, and it was temporary. Their mouths attracted each other like opposite magnets, and science, and shit.

Stan eventually decided to straighten his legs so their hips could meet flush. In response to the change in position, Kyle lifted his legs higher and awkwardly attempted to do that “hooking his ankles behind Stan's back” thing that they've seen in movies and heard about in books. Unfortunately, Kyle's hips weren't built to bend like that, so he settled for a 45° bend at the knee, the sock-clad soles of his feet pressed against the couch's seat.

They pressed together so close. The room was so achingly warm. It was all so calm. It was all so peaceful. It was all so –

... *right*.

Chapter End Notes

lol whatd i just write
yep theres the regret.
feedback/comments/constructive criticism always welcome
(thumbs up emoji)

Look Back

Chapter Summary

The fifteen lightly-salted tortilla chips glared at him from the two neat piles.

Chapter Notes

hey look another one

Within both of their chests, a mutual fear began to bloom. They both became afraid of what was going on, and they pulled away from the kiss, but the rest of their bodies were pressed together so rough. Their eyes met, pupils blown in a mixture of drugs and lust. Stan hooked himself onto that one word – *drugs*. This was because of the *drugs*, not because of any weird, suppressed feelings towards each other – absolutely not. They were both just high. *Really* high.

Stan's internal insistence on this regard didn't keep him from flushing red with embarrassment, however, and he struggled with a decision. Instinct tried to guide him into pressing his face into Kyle's shoulder to hide himself from the world, but common sense tried to urge him towards running, very fast, very far, in the opposite direction. In the end, Stan did neither.

The situation clicked.

Suddenly, it was a scramble of limbs and fabric, the two of them trying to sit away from each other at opposite ends of the couch. Hands smacked hands, shoulders and knees bumped together awkwardly, but at last, they managed. Stan squished his left side against the arm of the couch. After a moment, he crossed his right leg over his left and crossed his arms over his chest, shielding himself from prying eyes. Kyle was similarly guarding himself, his back to Stan, his toes against the opposite arm of the couch, and his knees tugged up to his chest as tight as possible.

God damn it, Stan thought. This couch isn't big enough.

Kyle cleared his throat.

“So, um...”

“It was the drugs,” Stan blurted. “We did that – it happened because we're high.”

“Yeah – ” Kyle's voice cracked through the duration of the vowels. He cleared his throat a second time, and tried again. “ – yeah. It... *felt* like that, because we're high. Weed heightens senses and... – and – and makes feelings stronger than they really – ... erm... are. Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Stan echoed.

Birds chirped outside the large window. The digital picture frame flicked to a shot of Kyle and Stan during Halloween, mid-high-five. That was the year they had decided to revisit their first ever Halloween costumes. In larger versions, of course, as teenagers are a hell of a lot bigger than infants. Kyle's pumpkin costume still had a stain on it from the fake blood Stan had tried to include in his vampire outfit. Stan remembered how Kyle's pun of the day was, “*Stan really re-vamped his first costume.*”

At the age of thirteen, Kyle and Stan had believed they were too grown-up for such a silly holiday. They were in that awkward phase of wanting to grow up, and not fully appreciating the things as they came for what they were. Stan would give anything to go back to the days where things were simpler. Stan would give anything to not be here, really – the air was thickening uncomfortably. He felt like he was hyperventilating.

This was too much. They were juniors in high school now. The biggest thing they should be worrying about is whether or not they'll get into college, not –

Not *this*.

Whatever *this* is.

Is this even a *this*?

Kyle made a rough, dry grunting noise deep in his throat, and shoved himself off of the couch. Stan's muscles ached in empathy from the rough treatment Kyle was giving his own. “Okay!” Kyle exclaimed, clapping his palms together. “Okay. Great. I'm hungry. You hungry? I'm hungry. You got any chocolate? Wait, no – I can't...”

Apparently instinctively, Kyle's hand traveled to his waistband. Stan tilted his head to see what his friend was doing, only to see he wasn't doing anything. His hand was just hovering there, above the left pocket of his jeans. “You can't... what?” Stan asked.

“Nothing,” Kyle dropped his hand back down. “Food. Hungry. Jesus Christ, I'm gonna die.”

Kyle's footsteps faded as he headed into the kitchen, distance naturally affecting the volume of his feet against the floor. The only thing Stan consciously wanted to do was curl in on himself and space out hardcore. And for a bit, that's exactly what he did. He's not exactly sure how long said “bit” *was*, but he knew that it couldn't have been *too* long. After the moment, a subconscious piece of his brain reacted, and he stood from the couch to follow.

Stan stopped in the entryway to the kitchen, his palm resting on the door frame. The scene unraveling in front of him within that very moment was one that he was sure he had never expected himself to see. Kyle had never been all too overtly excited at the prospect of food – and while he had his moments (of course he did, he was a teenage boy), Stan could honestly

say he'd never seen Kyle act quite *this* intently with the notion of searching for food. He could blame it on the munchies, he could blame it on the weed, but even then, Stan had only ever seen people react in a languid, relaxed fashion in search for snacking items. Was Kyle different, or was Stan simply *that* oblivious?

Kyle's search bordered on frantic. It got to the point where Stan was unsure of whether he was really hungry, or if it was just the embarrassment of their previous situation that was causing him to react so avidly.

A crinkling noise sounded through the air as Kyle's fingers grasped a family-sized bag of tortilla chips. He turned the bag in his hands, gazing over the backing like it held the secrets of the universe. His eyes scanned (what Stan could only assume was) the nutrition label. Unable to stop himself, Stan snorted. Kyle glanced up. "What?" He asked, aggravated.

"I don't get it. Are you trying to see if the chips are *kosher*, or...?"

Stan could hear Kyle's breath as it got caught in his throat. His eyes were no longer twitching with the reading of something so small on the back of thin, crumpled plastic. "*What?*" Kyle said again. This time, the word came out like the hiss of a snake. Although every piece of Stan's existence told him he had probably just made a massive mistake with a comment like that (especially at this point in time), his body shook with an involuntary chuckle.

Kyle dropped the bag of chips against the kitchen counter.

"I cannot *believe* you right now," Kyle stated. His voice, although stiff and firm with an authority that seemed almost silly in retrospect, was utterly calm and soft.

"You're right, you're right – " Stan broke down into more chuckles. He clapped a hand over his mouth to muffle the sounds of his laughter. When he calmed down, his hand fell back to his side. "I am so sorry. I'm a total dick. You have permission to hit me."

Kyle seemed to contemplate that for a moment. Even his eyes gave away that tidbit, glancing down towards his hands. He gripped the counter instead, knuckles fading white in the effort of staying calm. His eyelids fluttered closed, head hanging low. Stan could hear him count to ten under his breath. Kyle's shoulders shuttered with the release of every number from his lips.

Finally, Kyle looked up.

"I'm so mad at you right now," said Kyle. The death grip he had on the counter slowly relinquished, and his fingers instead reached towards the chip bag that was just in front of him. He fumbled with the clip that kept the bag closed. The shaking of his hands was so slight, Stan hardly noticed it – and when he did, he brushed it off as a side-effect from the anger Kyle confessed to. Even so, Stan watched Kyle like a hawk. He ran his left hand through the mess of red curls upon his head, while his right removed and carefully stacked exactly fifteen chips against the smooth surface of the counter. Stan leaned to the side, pressing his cheek against the door frame.

“Fifteen chips?” He asked when Kyle closed the bag back up. The fifteen lightly-salted tortilla chips glared at him from the two neat piles.

Kyle simply responded with, “fifteen carbs.” Stan flinched when the cabinet door slammed. Kyle brushed the two piles of tortilla chips into the awaiting palm of his opposite hand. Then, he took the fifteen chips over to the kitchen table, placed them into a single, much messier pile, and sat down.

“Fifteen carbs.” Stan repeated the information like he was waiting for it to process in his brain, and in a way, he was. There was something he was missing here, he was sure – but Kyle's anxious, bouncing leg told him not to egg him on about it.

Stan slowly walked over, lingering in front of the fridge for a moment. He contemplated grabbing something from it, and after thinking on it for a bit, he decided to go for it. Stan removed a plastic container of mango slices from the refrigerator, grabbed a fork from one of the drawers, and sat next to Kyle at the table.

Kyle's reaction was immediate. He spun himself to face away from Stan in the chair, crunching on a chip that he had popped into his mouth just a second before.

“God,” he said. “Eat that shit somewhere *else*, would you?”

“What do you have against mango?” Stan asked. He popped the lid off of the container of mango slices.

“I don't have anything against mango,” Kyle muttered.

“You clearly have something against mango.”

Stan speared one of the small slices with his fork.

“C'mon,” Stan insisted, lifting the fork up and gesturing with it. “Spill.”

Kyle tightened up on himself, nibbling at the edges of a chip with his front teeth. The way he was acting was utterly peculiar, to say the least – and Stan couldn't help but want to understand how the brain of his best friend worked. What type of incident would cause someone to refuse eating a food as specific as mango, anyway?

The mystery Kyle was drawing out was beginning to get on Stan's nerves. “Is it really that bad?” he asked, finally taking a bite out of the slice of mango on his fork. He continued the sentence with a full mouth. “I mean. What the hell happened that was *so bad* that you vowed off mango forever?”

“Has it ever crossed your mind that maybe I just don't like mango? Maybe not *everything* needs to have a reason behind it.” The wrinkles in Kyle's jacket adjusted themselves as he dropped the chip he was holding onto the table. “Maybe reasons are stupid. Maybe meaning is stupid. Maybe, maybe, maybe.”

Stan watched Kyle flail his hands about in half-arsed gesture as he said a few more muttered maybes, leaning against the table with his elbows as he chewed the fruit. Compared to Kyle,

his demeanor was almost unnervingly calm – especially as Kyle's foot began to erratically bounce in anxiety again. Finally, his hands settled across his chest and he leaned against the chair's backrest. Stan figured this to be a good time to talk. “Well, duh, not everything *needs* to have a reason,” he said. He poked one of the mango slices with his fork. “But pretty much everything *has* a reason anyway. Like – fuck. I don't know. C'mon, man, you're making me *think* while I *eat* and I don't want to.”

“And why *is* that, *Stan*?” Kyle asked. He practically slammed his palms against the surface of the table, then, his eyes scouring Stan's face.

“Dude, careful, your chips – ”

“Oh, fuck the chips! Tell me the *reason* behind why you don't want to think while you eat.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Because more thinking means less eating.”

And Kyle asked, “why is that?”

“Oh, for the love of – ” Stan lowered his head, lifting his left hand up to pinch at the bridge of his nose. He shut his eyes tightly. With a deep intake of breath, Stan let go of his nose and looked back to Kyle. “Jesus. You want to do the toddler thing? We'll do the fucking toddler thing. More thinking means less eating because I can't multitask. I can't multitask because I'll get distracted. I'll get distracted because I'm still probably high, I'm high because I smoked weed, I smoked weed because you wanted to, and – well, would you look at that? It seems we've come to an impasse of perspective. Why *did* you want to smoke, Kyle?”

Everything fell still as the mildly condescending tone of Stan's question kicked in. The surprisingly blank look on Kyle's face made him wonder if he had ended up taking this too far. Had his point really been worth getting so infuriated over? Was the information behind Kyle's aversion to mango really that important? Or was it about something else? Maybe he wanted to know about the mango, or maybe he just wanted to know what the hell the mango could represent in this situation – he couldn't figure it out. Regret bubbled up in Stan's throat. He turned away and shoved another slice of fruit into his mouth.

It was so goddamn delicious. Holy shit.

Finally, Kyle seemed to chillax. His foot was still bouncing in a way that made Stan stress out, but the other muscles in his body seemed to have taken the chill pill that was being served. Kyle picked at the salt on the tortilla chip he had left, half-eaten, on the table. Eventually, he began to pop the chips into his mouth at a much quicker pace than he had set before. He was still a slow eater, but that wasn't saying much when comparing him to Stan, who had always had a tendency to rush when eating.

“Why do you dislike mango?” Stan asked. The small container now only held a single piece of fruit inside of it, which kind of upset him, if he were to be honest. “Like, is it the taste? The sugar? I don't get it.”

Kyle broke a chip in half and nibbled on the corners. “Last time I had mango, I threw up,” he finally confessed.

The anticlimactic answer to his question kind of disappointed Stan. At the same time, he was glad it wasn't anything incredibly serious. "Okay," Stan said. "That makes sense."

Because it did. Considering all of Kyle's odds and ends – all of his traits, his quirks, all of *him* – it was no surprise that Kyle would avoid something that had, in past incidents, caused him to get sick (he wasn't sure why Kyle had gotten sick from *mango* of all things, but that wasn't the point).

The amount of sense made by the truth didn't make it any less ridiculous, though. Stan's face was tempted to crack a smile, and his lungs were tempted to shake in another bout of laughter, but his brain wasn't fogged up enough to find this situation very funny. Instead, he settled for poking the last slice of mango around in the container until it was pinned up to the edge. He examined the indents in the sides of the mango from the prongs of the fork. He glanced up to see Kyle watching him, a cracker pressed to his top lip.

Stan let go of the fork and slowly slid the container, now only holding a single mango slice and a fork, over to Kyle.

"You want the last piece?" Stan asked. Kyle made a face.

"Gross, dude. That'd be an indirect kiss."

"Yeah, well, we *directly* kissed on the couch not even twenty minutes ago, so." Stan shrugged. "I'd say we're passed 'indirect kissing'."

The only sound that came from Kyle for a moment was the soft crunching of a chip between his teeth. Neither of them spoke until Kyle had finished a couple more. "We should... talk about that, shouldn't we," Kyle said.

Stan answered with, "definitely."

More crunching. More breathing. More listening.

"We don't have to do that *now*, though, right?" Stan piped up.

"Absolutely not," Kyle answered.

Both boys shared a sigh of relief. It felt like a layer of the tension that had been slowly building over the past hour had been shed, and they were finally able to feel *normal* again. As normal as two teenage boys slowly coming down from a weed-induced high can feel, at least. Which was, surprisingly, pretty normal.

Suddenly, Kyle asked, "can we do it again sometime?"

Stan's heart fluttered. "What?"

"I – " Kyle cut himself off. When he continued, he was significantly quieter. "The... weed. Can we get high, again, sometime."

The flutter was crushed. Stan cleared his throat and said, "yeah, of course."

Stan drummed his fingers against the side of the container, listening to the gentle *click-tap-click* of his nails against the plastic.

“So,” Stan began. His fingertips nudged the container closer to his friend once more. Kyle stopped mid-crunch. “You want the last piece?”

“No,” Kyle answered, and before Stan could ask, he added, “I don’t know the nutritional value of a mango slice.”

“Why do you care about the – ”

Suddenly, it clicked.

"Right." Stan leaned back in his chair, spine pressing against the wood. His tone and posture held a realization that was almost stupid in nature. “You’re diabetic.”

“Wow. You’re just *full* of insight today, aren’t you?”

Obviously, that was not Stan’s proudest moment, but even with that being true, he did his best to take it in stride. If worse came to worse, he could blame it on the weed.

Stan grabbed the lip of the container and pulled it back towards himself, his free hand picking the fork back up. As he chowed down on the final slice of mango, Stan stood from the table and tossed the container next to the sink. He would leave it there, he decided, to be washed later. If he forgot to rinse it and toss it in the dishwasher before Monday rolled around, then his mom would do it. Either way, it’d get done.

Stan turned to face Kyle, leaning his lower back against the edge of the counter. “Don’t you need to check your blood sugar, or something?”

“I checked it before you followed me,” Kyle answered.

“Before...” Stan thought on that. His brows furrowed as he thought back to the moment he had left his comfortable perch on the couch. Had he spaced out longer than he initially thought? Probably, all things considering.

Stan pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes.

“Jesus,” he mumbled. “How long was I spaced out on that couch?”

Kyle popped a chip into his mouth, shrugged, and said, “long enough.”

Overpriced Mistakes

Chapter Summary

Stan wants to go back to that.

Chapter Notes

hi there its way too hot outside so i wrote about a snowy day
hopefully this chapter isnt too awful, lol
feedback/comments/constructive criticism is always welcomed!

From there, the times Kyle wanted to get high were spontaneous. As much as Stan wanted to say that his friend had always been a thorough planner, he couldn't, in good conscious, continue to use that descriptor. More than a few things had changed in South Park, and this appeared to be one of those things that he just needed to accept. Although reluctance always edged in the corners of his brain, he ultimately did his best not to mind. He was just thankful that it hadn't all ended in the hellish time his friend group called "freshman year".

The fact that Kyle had wanted to reconnect with him was a miracle enough, honestly, and although Stan eventually began to get worried at Kyle's increased insistence on getting high, he couldn't bring himself to decline. He was too afraid of ruining something that had been undisclosed, broken and fragile. He didn't want to fuck up the bond he had developed with Kyle, even though it was something brittle created by an already fucked-up version of dependency on drugs.

In many ways, Stan was a coward.

He didn't care.

The month of December slowly drifted into the new year of January. Things were already significantly better than last year, in reference to Stan's relationship with Kyle. They were hanging out every day, practically, much like they would when they were in their elementary years. The object of their focus was more sinister now, but that never deterred them. Alarm bells would ring loudly in Stan's ears whenever he handed the joint to a constantly irritated Kyle. They'd get sharper, louder, more pronounced as the hours faded, and Kyle's mood would mellow, and the two boys would be left alone, anywhere from buzzed to totally stoned, in the dark of some room in the Marsh house.

Sometimes Stan got the munchies. Sometimes, Stan was sure that Kyle had the munchies, but he'd be damned if he ever saw Kyle act on them. His self-control was overwhelmingly strong, even when he was under the influence. Stan had to credit him for that.

Sometimes, they couldn't stop laughing. Sometimes, they'd talk about everything and anything they could think of. Sometimes, they'd stare at each other and say nothing. Sometimes, they'd smother each other with their body heat and kiss until one of them gathered enough sense to pull away. Sometimes, Kyle would cry.

Sometimes, all of the above would happen – but never once did they talk about it afterwards.

They would suggest talking about it at a later date, they'd agree on waiting until they were hanging out without the introduction of weed, and then they would continue on with their day, doing everything and nothing and anything in-between to keep the questions out of each other's mouths.

And it was okay.

One early Saturday morning in January, when the snow was falling at seemingly record-breaking speeds and the roads couldn't be plowed, Kyle argued with his dad on his cell phone about trying to get home in time for lunch. "There's no way I could get home today," he had stated. "It's too cold, the snow's too high, and Stan's doors are *literally glued shut* with ice."

That last bit was a lie, but Stan wasn't going to interrupt the heated conversation currently taking place in his kitchen. Stan himself was in the living room. He laid on his back on the floor immediately in front of the couch, there was a lit joint in his hand, and he was doing his absolute best to smoke while laying down. It was dangerous business, he was well aware, but he couldn't find it in himself to care very much. His parents were stuck in some hotel in Denver. Why not live on the edge for a little?

With the ending statement of, "I'll be home tomorrow night," Kyle hung up on his father and exited the kitchen. He kicked Stan's knee in the process of climbing onto the couch, but Stan couldn't find it in himself to care very much about that, either. Instead, he lifted his hand and offered Kyle the joint.

Kyle took it begrudgingly, and smoked like he was pissed off at the thing. It was half finished at that point, and Stan was glad he was already feeling passably high. He knew he wasn't getting the joint back.

So, Stan stretched himself out on the floor, heels planted stiffly into the carpet, and his arms crossed under his head like a pillow. He was good to lay there, his brain swirling and dissipating in the same way the smoke from the joint was. He was relaxed, yet he was unwilling to close his eyes and chill in the way that ebbed too close to sleep. Kyle and Stan had just woken up from a deep, if not slightly weed-induced, sleep. He wasn't really tired, anyway.

Kyle drew a heavy intake of smoke through his body, and let it out with ease. His tolerance to weed had heightened, and he was now able to smoke without coughing like a newbie. Stan supposed that was because Kyle *wasn't* a newbie – not anymore. Something about that

thought made him feel weirdly uncomfortable. Maybe it was because he knew, in some fucked up sense of the prospect, that he had ruined Kyle's squeaky-clean, pristine record. *He* had been the one to introduce his best friend to drugs. If Kyle ended up graduating to harder shit in the future – if Kyle ended up being a part of the 15%, or whatever, that ends up addicted – Stan would never forgive himself. Maybe it was a selfish realization, or maybe it was a realization based in true concern – or maybe he was just paranoid.

“I fucking hate my dad,” Kyle said. Stan hummed in response, turning his head to watch Kyle finish off the joint. The hand that wasn't holding it was curled up tightly in his thin *Terrance and Philip* shirt. That article of clothing was a particularly old one. Stan remembered it from when they were kids. Kyle used to use it as a night shirt, because it was too big. Now that they were older, Kyle fit into it better. The fabric was brittle by now, however, and there were a few holes in the sleeves. Because of that, he still wore it as a night shirt.

“You don't hate your dad,” Stan finally answered. “You're just mad because he's currently being a douche.”

Kyle scoffed, twisting the lit end of the joint against the cinder block. They'd brought it downstairs yesterday, in the name of easily disposing of their smoking evidence while in the living room. Or, at least, putting it out so the house wouldn't catch fire. Kyle brushed his fingers together and settled in on himself on the couch. “Isn't that the same thing?” He grumbled.

“I don't think so,” Stan said.

Kyle left the joint on the cinder block. Without further hesitation, his frustration bubbled in a way that made him turn and drop himself backwards against the couch. His head rested on one of the arms of it. “Whatever,” huffed Kyle. “I still hate him.”

This time, Stan didn't reply. He knew, somewhere deep down, that feeding the fire in Kyle's chest would only make him more pissy – and quite frankly, he didn't want to deal with a pissy Kyle.

That didn't stop Kyle from trying to provoke an argument of some sort, though. If anything, it just spurred him on. “I guess you'd know about that, though, huh,” Kyle began. “Your dad being an alcoholic dickbag, and all.”

Something defensive within Stan's chest bubbled to the surface – something that tried to tell him that remark was wrong, and rude. He had never known Kyle to be overtly conflict-oriented, and yet here he was, trying to spur a reaction from him. The parallels between Kyle's relationship with himself, and Kyle's relationship with Cartman, were almost concerning. That's what got Stan to respond with, “Dude, what the *fuck*?”

“What?” Kyle asked. He said it in that tone that registered as pure sarcasm. It was an insincere question, one he knew the answer to. “I'm just saying the same shit you say.”

“Yeah, but...” Stan paused. The feeling bubbled up again. “But that's still my *dad*, dude.”

Kyle quipped with, "You're a fucking hypocrite."

The feeling bubbled up once more, stronger than it had been previously. Even so, Stan bit back the urge to defend his father and his actions. The prospect bothered him immensely, but Kyle was right. It was the definition of hypocritical, wasn't it? Stan bad-mouthed his father often, yet he had an issue with someone else saying the exact same things he did?

Stan sighed.

"Fuck off, Kyle."

Kyle snorted, rotating his body to lay on his side rather than his back. He slowly rolled his head to stare over the edge of the couch. Gingerly, he reached down to trail his hand down Stan's chest. His fingers came to pause in the middle of Stan's abdomen, before they slowly traveled back up to his collarbone. Stan's muscles fought to clench at the light, ticklish touch. The relaxation settling deep in his brain refused to let him tense as much as he wished, though.

Stan watched as Kyle traced his fingertips back down his chest and abdomen, then back up, then back down, then back up, and then back –

The pale, pink fingers came to pause dead in the center of Stan's chest. A pause for breath. A pause to adjust. A pause to listen. Their eyes met in something that felt a little too sensual to be just eye contact. Something stiff reared its ugly little head into the situation and caused both of their shoulders to quiver with an outward breath. Kyle's sole reaction was to slip his fingers into the crease of Stan's collar, the fabric wrinkling in his hand. He pulled Stan up, and Stan followed. Most of his weight was being placed on the heels of his palms, his skin uncomfortably divulging in the rough carpeting.

They acknowledged the closeness. They acknowledged it, and that was all they could do.

Until it wasn't.

It had felt like hours passed, sure, but in truth they knew it was minutes. The loss of time they experienced was something common, and borderline cliché at this point. But it didn't matter.

It didn't matter, because their faces were already just a few inches apart. It didn't matter, even though Stan had to crane his neck almost uncomfortably in order to press forward and kiss Kyle.

Immediately, Kyle lifted his head, his fingers slipping out from their grip on Stan's shirt. He transferred and shifted and draped his arms over Stan's shoulders, his spine bent in a purely unnatural, side-ways curve from how he layed on his side, but that didn't matter. It didn't matter, because it was comfortable. It didn't matter, because.

Because, because, because.

Their position together quickly changed, and as Stan maneuvered onto the couch, Kyle rolled onto his back. All the while, their lips never left each other. Their hands searched for

something neither boy was aware of, roaming and pressing and feeling and *discovering* places to caress and embrace. This was the moment. This was *their* moment, and purely their moment, and the moment where they held themselves and only themselves. Mouths formed and melded together, tongues pressed and sloppily shared something only a teenager would find romantic, but –

But it was perfect.

Somewhere, subconsciously, Stan knew that was juvenile. They were barely seventeen, barely juniors, barely able to know themselves well enough to understand the concept of *perfect* among someone else. They were kids. Stupid, stupid kids.

Stan wants to go back to that.

Ignorance grew between them. Stupidity was the strong suit of neither, though they acted as if it were of both. Stan ignored, and Kyle ignored, and pretended the outside world didn't exist.

Stan supported the majority of his body weight on his elbows and knees, which rested on the small amount of space that Kyle had left him. Kyle, comfortable and unable to complain below him, looped his arms even tighter around Stan's neck. Their chests pressed tightly together, and their stomachs heaved with each other's breathing.

Heat radiated. It exploded in their chests, and it left each touch sizzling with something they weren't ready for.

A grunt of surprise left Stan's throat as Kyle suddenly began to ease them into an upwards seated position. Stan felt his spine hit the backrest of the couch in the midst of their movement. Their lips separated. Kyle clambered onto his lap, thighs spread to straddle Stan's hips. The eagerness within Kyle's mind was easily translated through his body language, and it almost overwhelmed Stan when he recognized the look within Kyle's eyes.

Another bud of ignorance came with another string of kisses. They found a rhythm that flowed with each other's movements, and with the rhythm came more exploration. Kyle's hands snaked underneath Stan's shirt, tracing lines against the particularly sensitive skin across the sides of his ribs. With the sentiment, Stan shuddered. He circled his arms around Kyle's waist, holding onto his friend tightly. Their kisses slowly grew less and less focused, and they returned presses of their lips against each other's necks and jawlines.

“Fuck, Stan,” Kyle whispered, breathless into the side of Stan's neck. He rolled himself forward, tightening his grip on Stan. Their chests met flush once more.

“Yeah,” Stan responded. He slid his hands around and lower to Kyle's hips.

“I want – ” Kyle began. He cut off with a soft noise that slipped from his throat as Stan tugged him momentarily closer. Finally, he forced himself up from where he had buried himself against Stan's neck. Their eyes met, clouded with lust and slowly dilating from drugs and affection. Kyle's in particular were dark and hazed. His hands squeezed at Stan's shoulders as he said, “I want you to fuck me.”

Something inside of Stan's chest sank. It dipped down to his navel, and as soon as his heart pounded, it shot back up into his throat. Even so, this thing that pounded in the back of his throat was so very subtle. It caught his breath like a net that only air couldn't get through. In relation, the heels of his palms dug sharply into Kyle's thighs. "...what?"

"I want you to fuck me," Kyle repeated. He pressed his hips forward, against Stan's. They shared an outward hiss of breath.

Kyle's eyes were dark, and they were wet. The iris glistened in the way eyes do when holding tears back, but Stan knew better. Stan saw through the tearful watering, he saw through the dilated pupils, he saw through the reddened corners of the sclerae. A boy that Stan had known for his entire life was behind those eyes, and the difference in recollection he was able to notice was... stark. It was scary. It was wrong. This was so, so, so wrong.

Because –

Because, deep down, he knew this wasn't Kyle. It was Kyle, but it wasn't *Kyle*, and it hadn't been for a long time.

Stan's eyes began to water in the same way Kyle's did, but for a different reason. They burned in the effort of holding back tears. He failed. Within that moment, Stan was consumed by guilt.

"No," Stan mumbled. His face flushed in the effort of keeping his cool, but the attempt was purely in vain. His shoulders shook. He let go of Kyle's hips, and reached up to clasp his friend's face. His fingertips met with curly red hair that had darkened over time in a way that was much too fitting for Kyle. "No, no, no. Kyle."

Kyle said nothing.

Stan was wrecked in a soft sob. "Oh, God, Kyle," he breathed. He trailed his hands through Kyle's hair, feeling and thinking and imagining and questioning. Intensity burned in his chest. His heart pounded in his throat. What had he done? "I never want to get you high again. Never, never, never."

Kyle blinked, slow and absent. "Okay," he replied.

Intermission

Chapter Summary

I was in one of those states where reality doesn't feel like reality.

Is it normal to feel that way?

January 15th, 2013

Stan,

Hey. Sorry I haven't written you recently. Would you believe me if I told you that I had sat down multiple times in the past couple weeks to write you another letter? No? Yeah, I won't blame you. I probably wouldn't believe it, either.

But, for all it's worth, it's true. I sat down just yesterday, all scholarly, with my wide-ruled composition notebook and my dad's stupid engraved pen. He got those, y'know. Those pens business people use. It has his name and e-mail on it. It's ridiculous. Anyway, I sat down after I got home yesterday, and I took out my composition notebook, and I pulled out the stupid pen, and I put it to the paper. I even wrote out the date and your name at the top.

“January 14th 2013 – Stan”.

And then I stopped.

I mean, I didn't stop marking the paper with the pen. I doodled a little, and re-wrote over the date and your name and made the lines thicker, but I stopped writing the letter itself. I know you do that, too. You get stuck on handwritten rough-drafts of your essays, and then you go back and re-write over what you've already written just to keep your hand busy. Does that help you think? It helps me think. I like to think it helps me think, at least. It probably doesn't do shit other than make the paper below it permanently marked with the stupid indentations of the words.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

You know what I've noticed recently? Lots of things are stupid. Like, everything. It's all just really fucking retarded. Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like everything is stupid, and nothing really matters in the end?

I was about to ask if you ever felt like everything you've ever known and come to love is actually just pure, unadulterated shit, but. I know the answer to that one. I guess I'm

becoming cynical.

That's shitty.

Hey, Stan, do you remember that week when we were snowed in alone at your place, and we got high, and we did that thing? I barely remember it. I was in one of those states where reality doesn't feel like reality. Do you ever get those episodes? Where you're normal one minute, and then the next, everything is just... fake. It's all fake, and you're not real, and nothing around you is real? And it feels like a dream?

It kind of feels like being high, except it doesn't feel even remotely good. It feels like nothing. When I start feeling that way, it's a good indicator that I'm not going to remember most of what's going on at the time. Like, I'll *remember* it, but I won't really remember it. I'll remember the concept of remembering the thing that happened to me, that I'll remember. I'll remember the things I did in a way that makes it feel like it didn't happen to me. I'll remember it in a way that feels like I'm watching a movie. Is that normal, do you think? Is it normal to feel that way?

Whatever.

I'll just go under the assumption that you remember it. Because, even though I was high *and* in a weird episode-like state, I remember it decently. I remember the way it felt. And I remember having nothing in my brain when we were doing the thing we did. The thing I remember most about it is you crying, though. You cried for a long time. You said something and cried. You told me you don't want to get me high anymore. That sucks, and I didn't understand it. I *don't* understand it. I don't know if I *want* to understand what your mind was doing in that moment. I think it'd just hurt me, maybe. God, I don't know. Fuck it.

I held you as you cried. I curled up with you on the couch, as you pressed your face into my chest, and you just cried. You bawled. It was like you were letting everything inside of your head out. It must have been a lot, too, because you were incapacitated for hours. You were really fucked up, Stan, and it was scary.

At the same time, though, it was kind of sweet.

It felt really good that you trusted me enough to let me see you in such a fragile state. It felt good to know I was able to take care of you.

Jesus. That was super gay.

Anyway, I'll try to write more letters. Write me back soon, okay?

I love you, man.

Sincerely,
your super-best-friend Kyle.

A Modern-Day Renegade

Chapter Summary

Within that moment, it didn't really feel like a lie.

Chapter Notes

i dont even know how but i powered through this in four hours, lol. hopefully y'all enjoy. :)
comments/constructive criticism/feedback; all of it is welcome!

To say his nap was fitful would be a significant understatement. Stan didn't feel like he was asleep, even when he was in that blissfully torturous phase of waking from sleep. He didn't feel like he needed more, or less – he felt like he needed time to just not exist, and for what it was, he figured that might've been the scariest bit of it all. It was difficult to make sleep feel like it was enough, these days.

Stan grunted as he shoved himself up. His eyes processed the surrounding room slowly, and they adjusted to the light shedding in through the living room window. He struggled to understand when he had laid down on the couch and passed out, and he couldn't exactly pinpoint whether or not he cared a whole lot. Somewhere in the back of his brain, he knew he did. There was still a part of him that refused to let him care, though.

Through characteristically tired eyes, Stan found himself able to acknowledge that the window was no longer covered in a light dusting of snow. This, paired with the fact that Kyle wasn't in the immediate area, was cause enough for him to believe his friend had decided to go home. Stan didn't blame him. He was sure comforting a panic-ridden, emotionally-distraught friend wasn't exactly on Kyle's week-end to-do list.

He swallowed and shut his eyes. There was a weight, somewhere tugging himself down to the ground from the base of his lungs, that urged him to lay down and not bother. He was so exhausted. Wasn't it Sunday? He usually felt better on Sundays. More energetic, because he had been allowed a solid day or two to rejuvenate from the exhausting school week. Stan breathed in through his diaphragm, but the only thing that accomplished was reminding him of the weight in his chest.

In order to counteract this, Stan forced himself to stand up.

His eyes caught the fluorescent glimmer of the orange plastic of a pill bottle. Stan turned his attention towards the coffee table. It now held the cinder block, the mostly-burnt up remains of the joint from earlier, and the attention-grabber itself: the pill bottle. He breathed in through his diaphragm again, thoughts and emotions from the memories of just a few hours earlier breaking in and making him feel... things. Things that he wasn't sure he wanted to face right now. Conflicted, Stan clenched his fists and shut his eyes tightly. The tension allowed him to ignore everything else, and after just a few seconds, he had calmed down enough to right himself. Even so, the thoughts remained.

Stan wasn't entirely sure what was going through his brain in that moment. He was still uncoordinated, whether it be from the remnants of marijuana or the result of a fitful sleep. His fingers jumbled a little more than usual as he gathered the evidence from his and Kyle's weed-ventures. That's a good one, he thought languidly. He should bring that up sometime, maybe. Probably not. He shook his head. His feet worked faster than his brain did, at least – they brought him around the couch and up the stairs, all the way to his bedroom, where he proceeded to replace the cinder block on his windowsill. He picked crumbles and tiny remnants from the burnt, ashen joint up from his bedspread as they flickered through the air like static. The joint was being crushed and crumbled by the (actually relatively heavy) pill bottle which he cradled in the same palm. He backed off of his bed and stumbled when back on his feet, no longer on his knees on his bed.

What the fuck should he do with the rest of this shit?

There was absolutely no way he was going to let Kyle at this. No way in hell. Something wicked was sparked in Kyle every time he had this shit, and it was significant enough for Stan to know and understand that it wasn't okay to allow his friend to continue to use. He had enabled him for almost a month, at this point, and he refused to enable him anymore.

Stan glanced around his bedroom. For what, exactly, he wasn't sure. Whatever it was that he could find, really. A hiding place, maybe? An area he could discard of this shit, and never have to look at it ever again. His experiences with weed were far too many bad, mixed with far too few good. It made his stomach flip just imagining smoking anymore.

How funny was that? One single bad experience had fucked it up for him for a while, if not forever.

Stan's eyes caught the trashcan in the corner of his room next to his bed.

That.

Is that a good place?

Not at all, Stan thought. *But it'll have to do.*

Paranoia urged him to glance over his shoulder. He wasn't sure what he figured he would find. Kyle? His parents? Satan?

Whatever it was, it wasn't there.

Slowly, he stepped towards the trashcan, fingers twisting the joint into nothing other than debris of paper and finer clumps of weed. His fingernails were coated in the remnants of smoke and memories of approximately two or three hours ago. Stan's shoulders were burning like they'd been caught in the harsh gaze of the sun, deepening his natural slouch; his spine ached. He blamed it on an empathetic human reaction of what he was doing. His palms collected the torn mess of what had previously been a mostly-smoked joint. The weight was back, all guilty, heavy and wheezing under the abstract notion that he had emotionally stood-up Kyle. He had promised to hang out and temporarily reside in the socialization of whatever that entailed. He wasn't there, though. Stan felt like he'd run out of pieces of himself to give, and it hadn't even been all that long.

All of this was going under the assumption that Kyle hadn't left as soon as Stan had fallen asleep. Stan dug his clean palm sharply against his eye, trying to forcefully remove the exhaustion that lingered.

His brain confirmed the trashcan as the proper place of discarding the weed.

His smoke-greased fingernails scraped the pile out of his palm and into his trash can, and it fell like dust through the bundled up tissues and old band-aids. It disappeared from sight and his lungs sank through to his feet, because – because he couldn't get the image of his eight-year-old self emptying his trash can and finding *weed* buried at the bottom. Young Stan wouldn't know what weed looked like at that point, so he wouldn't think twice of it, and then Young Stan would meet his friends at the bus stop and go to school and go to class and eat lunch and actually put effort into his homework and play with his friends and go to sleep.

The guilt bloomed so hard and so fast, it made Stan feel lightheaded. That's where he ended up. After seventeen years of growing up, he ended up standing in his bedroom, having an existential crisis over his stupid fucking *trashcan*, of all things.

Stan walked away from the trash can and tossed yesterday's clothing piles into the hamper. He rubbed his nose with his left hand. He felt raw, red and on fire. He could feel the carpet against the heel of his foot through a hole in his sock, and he couldn't tell if it hurt or if it felt like nothing, and suddenly the metal of his doorknob was pressed into the palm of his right hand. The left one braced him on the doorframe, putting up with his body weight, and that same hand brushed against the wall and the banister and left an invisible trail of where he'd been. That invisible trail would linger long after he had gone, he was sure of it.

His feet finally stopped carrying him further into the depths of his house when he entered the kitchen. Stan was conflicted when he saw Kyle sitting at the kitchen table, a coffee cup full of water in front of him. It didn't seem like he had drank very much of it, at that point. There was ice inside, but it was practically entirely melted at that point. The only thing Kyle seemed to be doing was just... sitting there, staring into the mug. Maybe he was looking at his reflection, or maybe he was trying to find the secrets of the universe inside that cup. Maybe he saw something Stan could only dream of seeing in something so mundane. Kyle's eyes were more tired than Stan's weighted chest.

What does the world have against Kyle? Stan wondered.

“Kyle?” Stan asked, his voice cracking in effort. Kyle perked up immediately, his curly hair bouncing in the way it did, defying gravity almost hilariously. At the moment, he didn't find it funny, though. Stan found it –

He swallowed.

“You... stayed,” Stan said.

Stan expected a smart-alec remark, but he received none. All Kyle said was, “yeah.”

That was it. Stan wouldn't say the tension in the air within that moment was awkward, but it was certainly stiff and unforgiving. Kyle's grip on the mug tightened. His fingertips glistened with the condensation of the cold drink. Reminded of his water, he brought the mug up to his lips to take a large drink. His swallow was audible. He set it back down on the table afterwards.

“Are you okay?” asked Kyle. Stan nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “Are you?”

“I'm okay enough,” he responded. His shoulders shrugged loosely. “I'm in the midst of coming down from the high, I think. It's... weirdly exhausting. *Abnormally* exhausting. Like, usually there isn't this big of a dip with weed, is there?”

Stan understood what Kyle was talking about. Probably not in the same way, but similarly, nonetheless. “No, there usually isn't a big dip with weed. Not in my experience, at least.”

Kyle's shoulders were visibly weighted.

“I'm feeling a dip, too,” Stan offered. *As if that would be solace for anyone in this situation*, he told himself. “Like, I just want to... collapse on the couch, and fall asleep.”

Kyle laughed out the word, “forever.”

And Stan laughed too as he repeated, “forever.”

Stan slipped into the seat immediately next to Kyle at the kitchen table.

“How are you feeling, by the way?” Stan asked.

“Me?” Kyle looked up. Stan nodded. “Dude, what? Shouldn't *I* be the one asking *you* that?”

“Oh, uh-uh. You're not pulling that shit on me. I asked first.” Stan reached over, nudging Kyle's shoulder with the knuckles of his gently-closed fist. He dropped his hands into his lap after receiving a quiet chuckle from his friend. “So. How're you doing?”

“I'm...” The light from the kitchen windows glittered across Kyle's irises. “... dammit, didn't we already ask each other this question?”

“We asked each other if we were *okay*. The only thing we know about how we're feeling from that is we're both *okay*.”

“Isn't that enough, though?” Kyle asked. “Isn't it enough to be *okay*, and that's it?”

Stan shrugged. “Not in my experience.” He breathed out, long and sharp, through his nose when he saw Kyle roll his eyes. A memory of just how glassy Kyle's eyes had been when he was high, just a few hours ago, broke through Stan's consciousness. He breathed out harshly again to force away the vision of Kyle's obvious emotional distress from earlier. He chose to remember something from a few years ago, instead. “Trust me, dude. You were there for that.”

“What? Is this about the meds? Because I was the *cause* of that,” Kyle said.

“Hey, at least you saved my life, right?”

“That's an exaggeration, and we both know it.”

“Is it, though?” asked Stan.

Kyle's lack of a response spoke loud enough for both of them to understand. With that, Stan went with a silent, mutual agreement to move on.

“Just answer the question.”

“I'm feeling...” Kyle trailed off. His eyes moved from right to left *ever so slightly*, just barely letting on that he was reading his thoughts like a book. His next response was undeniably going to be calculated. Stan just wished that he was enough of a comfort for Kyle that they could talk about feelings without it being sensitive. Even so, he understood.

Stan was a hypocrite, after all.

“I'm feeling,” Kyle said. “I'm feeling a lot. Life is just...”

Another pause.

“Life is just bullshit, man. Life's bullshit.”

“I agree with you there,” Stan said. “Life *is* pretty bullshit.”

Kyle withdrew from the mug entirely, no longer allowing himself to touch the smooth surface of it. He wiped his damp hands on his pants, and leaned back in his chair. “Yeah,” he said. His eyes paused, looking towards his left hand. “Life is bullshit.”

Something felt amiss.

“Okay, your turn,” Kyle stated. He adjusted his posture, his arms crossing over his chest casually. “How are *you* feeling?”

Stan's brain returned to the heaviness seated deeply within his chest. A part of him willed him to be honest with his best friend. The hypocrisy was beginning to make him feel a little ill. Just how far was he willing to go with it? Maybe it had something to do with just how much he was allowing himself to feel. Maybe it had something to do with how much he liked either himself or Kyle. Maybe the more he liked someone, the more pushy he was about their feelings being shared. Or maybe he's just a hypocrite. "I'm feeling pretty good, actually."

It was weird. Within that moment, it didn't really feel like a lie.

That didn't stop his brain from pumping guilt into his veins. That didn't stop the word *liar* from seeping into his skeleton.

Kyle smiled, weak and utterly reflexive. "I'm glad. That must've been a damn good cry, huh? I mean, you were *really* out of it for a while, there."

"Yeah, it was..." Stan reached up to brush his fingertips over his top lip. "It was a good cry. It made me feel better. God, that probably makes me sound like a total baby."

"Everyone needs to cry every once in a while," Kyle said.

"Did... did I get your shirt wet?"

"Yeah, but... don't worry about it, Stan. I don't really mind." Kyle smiled. Stan was hesitant in returning the sentiment, but he did nonetheless. They were gazing at each other in a way that was utterly weak. Their brains were feeble, reeling and wrecked from something they were holding back, silent underneath their teeth and tongues.

"Should we..." Stan fell quiet almost as soon as he had started speaking. "...should we... talk... about what happened – y'know... *before* I started crying like a bitch?"

Kyle's breathing stilled. "I... I guess we should," he mumbled. "I mean... that's, like... the mature thing to do in this situation, right? Talking about shit?"

"Yeah," Stan said.

"Okay," Kyle said.

They were quiet. Quiet, and still, and unable to breathe in the nervousness of talking about it. Stan tapped the center of his left wrist with his right index finger. It was an unsuccessful attempt at helping him gather his thoughts, really. He felt bad about not knowing what to say, but thankfully, Kyle knew enough of how to start the conversation.

"It was just something we did because we were high," Kyle said.

"Well, yeah," Stan agreed. "Drugs. Weed, and shit. Brain chemistry. I don't fucking know, did you pay attention in health last year?"

"Of course I did," Kyle replied. "I passed the class, didn't I?"

"That literally means nothing. I slept through that class and got an A."

“The only reason you got an A is because you were on the football team, and our teacher practically had a hard-on for the football players.”

“Actually, I think he *literally* had a hard-on for the football players. He was fired in September for that.”

“Jesus, really?” Kyle looked at Stan, his expression incredulous. Stan nodded in confirmation. After a deep breath, Kyle sighed. “Holy shit, dude. Nasty.”

“I know.”

“But... speaking of football, you should join the football team again this year,” Kyle suggested.

“Hell no.”

“Hell yeah! You were really good at it.”

“Keyword '*were*' – and stop derailing the conversation, man. We have more important things to talk about than... football, or whatever.”

“Fine, fine.” Kyle uncrossed his arms, leaning on the surface of the kitchen table with his elbows. His gaze lowered towards his mug once more. The kitchen was quiet, for a moment, before he asked, “can I be honest for a sec?”

“Duh. Honesty is a good thing in these types of talks, I think.”

Kyle nibbled at the chapped skin of his bottom lip. “I feel kind of guilty about it,” he said. “Kissing you, I mean.”

Stan furrowed his brows, jumping on Kyle's words almost protectively. “What? Why?”

“Well, you're not exactly *single*, Stan.”

Stan fell silent.

“I never really got along very well with Wendy,” Kyle said. “But... that doesn't mean I want to *hurt* her like this, y'know? I don't really want to be known as the guy who you cheated on her with.”

“It wasn't cheating,” Stan defended. “It was – I mean... we're... you're *Kyle*. It's not cheating if it's with you.”

The muscles in Kyle's face tensed. “Why? What's different about me?”

“I don't mean – ” Stan cut off. “I just... you're *Kyle* – ”

Kyle snapped, agitated by the repetition. “Thank you, captain obvious, for teaching me my fucking name. What's that got to do with anything?”

“You're my *best friend*. And – I mean, kissing can be platonic.” Stan was grasping at straws, and he knew that, but he was reluctant to admit his fault.

Kyle, pitying Stan's reluctance, asked, “are you planning on telling Wendy?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not?”

“I don't want to hurt her, I – ”

“What about this would hurt her?” Kyle asked. His cheeks were flushed, something uncommunicable was trying to be communicated within his eyes. “It was *platonic*. Right, Stan?”

Stan's mouth lingered open, though they both knew he had nothing to say. He was so shocked out of his inward fantasy that he wasn't entirely sure if he was embarrassed, ashamed, or both. Stan brought his hands up to his hair, carding his fingers through the strands and locks. “It... but – it doesn't mean anything.”

Kyle's face tensed again. “What doesn't mean anything?”

“The kisses, and shit, I mean – it doesn't mean anything, right? So, it doesn't count.”

Kyle opened his mouth to speak, though he only ended up closing it without saying anything further. He swallowed. And then, he opened it again, though he said something different than what his brain was urging him to earlier. “We shouldn't do it again.”

“What?” Stan asked.

“Kiss. Or anything else, for that matter. We shouldn't do anything else. It was a dumb mistake, anyway, right?” Kyle stood from the kitchen table, the fingers of his right hand clasping the mug through its fragile handle. It was already cracked, from years of abuse of his drunken father and the mugs upon mugs of coffee drank to stem any and all hangovers. The crack was minuscule, however, so it was no surprise that Kyle didn't see it until it was too late.

Mid-walk towards the sink to dump the rest of his beverage, the thin handle snapped. Gravity wasn't on Kyle's side in that moment. The mug severed itself from the ties it had previously held with the intact portion of the handle.

“Agh, shit!” Kyle cursed, trying his best to catch the mug before it fell. His reflexes weren't quite quick enough to manage, however. The porcelain shattered on the kitchen tile, and slid along the smooth surface after being slicked by the water previously contained within the cup. “Fuck!”

Kyle practically collapsed to his knees in effort to clean up the mug, picking up small shards of the cup with his bare fingers. Stan stood and immediately began to help.

“I'm so sorry,” he said. “I didn't mean to drop it.”

“It's fine,” Stan replied. “It's fine. Don't worry about it. We have a lot of these, so it doesn't matter.”

Kyle stilled. Stan glanced up to look at his friend's face, trying to figure out why he was suddenly so motionless. “Oh,” Kyle said. “*Right*. You have more than one, so it doesn't matter.”

Stan stilled.

Kyle scoffed, his eyes reflecting pain. “This one doesn't mean anything, anyway. Isn't that right, Stan?”

Out In Colorado

Chapter Summary

It took him a moment to realize he was hearing his parents' conversation through the walls.

Sharon Marsh rapped her knuckles against her son's bedroom door approximately thrice before allowing herself in. Usually, she would give Stan some time to respond before she opened the door, but this was not a usual circumstance. He had not responded to her many consistent attempts at waking him via loud knocking and shouting through a wooden barrier. Therefore, it was a logical leap to blame him for anything she were to walk in on, if there were to be anything.

There was nothing, as it was soon discovered. Her eyes landed on the gentle rise and fall of her son's breathing where he lay, curled up on his side in bed. The blankets were practically wrapped around Stan like a cocoon, as per usual when he slept. This was a nasty habit that she was almost certain he had inherited from his father.

She walked to the edge of his bed and nudged his shoulder with the heel of her palm. At the significant lack of any sort of response, she nudged him again. When he still didn't respond after a third attempt, she proceeded with a more forceful shake. This, he responded to – incredibly quickly, at that. The sheer force of his flinch was enough to get her to withdraw – and enough for him to now be sitting up, rather than laying down.

At first, he struggled with loosening the blankets enough to be able to move. He flailed his arms against the fluffy prison, and the sharp movements made the thick fabric shudder and pile up, surrounding him at his waist.

Stanley swallowed sharply as he gathered his bearings, pupils steadily adjusting themselves to the light that was shining in through the opened curtains. His breathing hitched as he calmed, seemingly no longer on the verge of a minor asthma attack from the surprise. Sharon quirked a brow up as she watched him.

“Are you okay?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. Stan nodded. He slouched, relaxing a little more into his natural posture. Both of his hands lifted up to press against his face, fingertips rubbing against his eyes to help him wake up. Sharon's stance adjusted, quizzical. “Weird dream?”

“*Bad* dream,” Stan choked out. His throat had yet to fully wake up, apparently. He coughed into the empty air. Admittedly, the atmosphere felt a lot thinner than usual, causing him to feel as if he were struggling to breathe. He wasn't, though – and he *knew* he wasn't. The dream was the cause of the tight feeling in his airways, he was sure.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Sharon questioned, the words coming out slowly. Stan immediately shook his head.

“God, Mom, no. Just – get out, so I can change. Please.”

His mother's eyes narrowed, and all in all, her physical expression was stiff in an odd type of disbelief. Reluctance, perhaps. “Alright, Stanley,” she said. “Hurry up and get ready. I want to make sure you eat breakfast before you leave for the bus.”

Apparently satisfied, she turned and headed out the door. Stan listened to her footsteps press their way down the hallway. When he was sure she was gone, he untangled himself from the blanket and kicked his legs over the side of his bed. He lingered, just for a moment, to allow his brain to fog in an attempt at waking itself up sufficiently.

“Oh, Stanley, one more thing.”

Stan startled when his mother poked her head into the room once more. Acting on instinct, he tugged the blanket down the bed and over himself to cover his bare legs. “What, Mom?”

Sharon lifted her brows, bemused at his sudden lurch for cover. “Stan, I changed your dirty diapers. You don't need to be self-conscious.”

“What do you need?” Stan huffed, dodging her attempt at getting an explanation.

She pursed her lips. “Make sure you take your medication.”

“Yeah. I know.”

Her expression twitched in a way that translated the fact that she wanted to say something more. She ultimately said nothing, however, and left her response to a simple nod. Out of courtesy, she reached into the bedroom and gripped the handle of the door. She closed it behind her, allowing Stan some time of promised privacy. Although he didn't thank her directly, he was appreciative of the gesture.

Stan's brain ticked and counted the seconds as he lingered for just a few more minutes on his bed. He was back at square one, essentially; his eyes fell in exhaustion. He was calming from the surprise of waking up so harshly from such a vivid dream, and with the calming of his nerves, he began to feel more and more shitty.

Christ. How late did I stay up last night?

Swallowing down an early-morning haze, he reached behind himself and felt underneath the blankets for his phone. When he didn't feel the cold screen against his fingertips, he turned around to look around his bedspread for the electronic device.

That's weird. He could have *sworn* that he'd put it next to his head last night before he went to bed. He glanced at his nightstand, which didn't hold any answers.

Okay. What the hell. Where did I put it?

Stan slid his hand around under his blankets again, feeling for his phone. This time around, his fingers bumped the smooth case. He breathed a small sigh of relief. He wouldn't say he had been panicky about not having his phone, but he definitely wouldn't have been happy with himself if he had lost it because he was stupid enough to listen to a podcast to help him fall asleep. He didn't even particularly *like* the podcast – it was just the only one that wasn't total shit.

Stan flopped onto his back, clicking the power button on his phone. He narrowed his eyes at the offending artificial brightness, allowing his brain to process the numbers collecting themselves at the top of his screen.

“Awh – *awww!*” Stan squawked incredulously, shooting upright. His eyes flicked as he read over the charge. “*Twelve percent? Are you kidding me?*”

Agitated, Stan forced himself out of bed. He allowed the screen of his phone to go black as it fell asleep, the nail of his index finger tapping against the case. He scanned his room for his charger, and stumbled over to the corner outlet of his bedroom when he spotted it. The white curl of the cord contrasted in an easily-recognizable way against his blue carpet. Every muscle within his body protested as he moved across the room and crouched down to plug it in.

Another pause. Stan leaned forward, his forehead thudding quietly against his wall.

Snap.

Just like that, any energy he had earlier was gone. A cramp began just underneath his rib cage, begging him to crawl back into bed and forget the world. Imaginary bugs zoomed and flew through the clear spots in his vision, making his existence out to be nothing but a shitty attempt at static. The thought of static caused him to remember the smell of a static-ridden television screen – the old one that they used to have in the living room before the flat screen. Stan can remember being a dumb kid, running around the house until he got tired. He would go up to that old television and put his palms against it, feeling the twitch and jerk of electricity.

A piece of him wanted to feel that again. It was the same piece of him that craved acting out, and craved pain, and craved the sound of Kyle's breathing. It was a shameful piece of him that was more than likely based in regret. His lungs squeezed sharply in guilt of everything he's ever done wrong in his life, as it came to slap him in the face.

Stan forced himself to stand up when a weight began to grow inside of his chest. It was the same weight he had felt yesterday, after waking up from the couch. It was the same weight he'd felt the day before, and the day before, and the day before. It was a weight that was always there. It was a weight that tried to paralyze him. The scary part is that it would succeed in paralyzing him if he skipped out on a single dose of that stupid medication.

On his way to the door, Stan grabbed an outfit from his closet. He held the collection of clothing by his side, his fingers gripping individual folds of the differing fabrics. The feeling of denim against his fingers was uncomfortable, but not wholly unwelcome. He opened the

door using that convenient little wrist-roll trick, peered cautiously out into the hallway, and then proceeded towards the bathroom to shower.

His bundle of clothes fell to the bathroom tile with a soft rustle of cloth so he was free to brush his teeth. Stan's eyes gazed down towards the counter, half-lidded and empty. Somewhere in his mind, he was thinking to himself about things he couldn't quite figure out. Thoughts would come and flip and stumble and then they'd be gone. He flicked the tap on with his wrist, cleaning the bristles of his toothbrush and spitting into the sink. He cupped his hands and collected water, rinsing his mouth free of stupid toothpaste suds.

Now that his mouth felt clean, he felt comfortable proceeding with the rest of his day like a regular human. It had always amazed him just how much a simple act of hygiene could help keep him sane.

He splashed his face with the cold water from the faucet. Immediately, his body reacted; his lungs heaved with the shocking temperature. In the moment, he decided for certain on a cold shower. He had reached the point of needing the surprise of chilled water to keep himself from giving up on staying awake right where he stood.

Stan slid his hand underneath his shirt, lifting the hem up to dab his face dry. The fabric fell from his hand. He took the moment to choke down his stupid pill, and swallow down some stupid water, and lock the stupid door. He stripped out of his clothes and tugged the shower handle. This was usually the point where he would stand around and wait for the water to heat up, but today was different. Today, he was gonna mix it up a little.

He regretted it as soon as he stepped into the shower.

“*Shiiit*,” he hissed, jerking to cross his arms over his chest. He rubbed the heels of his palms against his shoulders, trying to collect heat and get the blood flowing through his torso.

Instead of actually warming itself, his body only forced a shudder to roll through his spine. The spray from the shower head cascaded down through his hair and enveloped him in a cold waterfall. Individual droplets fell down his back, slipping between his shoulder blades and falling in a steady stream around his feet. Why did he think a cold shower was a good idea? It's January, for God's sake.

Shaking himself, he reached for the shampoo, eyes squinting through the cold that rained down around him.

“*...ot in... mood.*”

Mildly confused, Stan perked up and glanced around the shower stall. Obviously, no one was there – but that hadn't processed in his brain right away.

“*... -y not?*”

It took him a moment to realize he was hearing his parents' conversation through the walls.

“*...n't - d to be... - ood.*”

Stan instinctively turned his head to look towards the bathroom door. It was crystallized through the frosted glass of the shower, but still visible enough as a blur of brown. He clicked open the cap when he heard footsteps trailing down the hallway. He fumbled with the bottle of shampoo, momentarily overwhelmed by the smell of apples. *Whew*. That's strong.

"Is something wrong?"

Stan almost dropped the bottle at how clear the speaking suddenly was. That was his dad's voice, for sure. He utilized his elbow to help close the cap to the shampoo, and set it down as quietly as possible on the shower's shelf.

"No, I... I don't know, Randy."

There was his mom.

"What do you mean 'you don't know'? Either something's wrong, or something isn't."

Silently, Stan began to scrub his fingers through his hair. The shampoo spread and lathered with ease, and the texture of the smooth suds alone was enough to help him feel a little better about the cold water. It helped him ignore the conversation happening just in the next room, too. Although he'd never been a goody-two-shoes, he still had morals that held him to the firm belief of keeping private conversations private. He wasn't going to insert himself where he wasn't supposed to –

"I'm worried about Stan," he heard his mother say.

Stan's movements slowed to a stop. His neck was held at an uncomfortable angle, chin tipped towards the ceiling. The fingers in his hair were stiff and aching to grab at his hair and pull. He didn't allow himself to. More water from the shower head fell down onto his face and rinsed the soap from his hair.

"Worried about Stan? Why?" his father questioned.

"I saw something in his room today."

Stan's heart dropped into his gut.

"Saw what?"

There was a pause, before his father spoke again.

"Awh, did you find more freemium games? Is he back on those stupid things again?"

Stan's posture fell forward. Not even a second later, a stray stream of water caused shampoo to travel down his forehead and into his eye. Immediately, Stan reacted. He hissed a breath in through his teeth, and slowly let it out, pressing the heel of his palm against his eye. He tipped his head forward fully, chin almost against his clavicle.

"No. Trust me, you'd know if he was still using those."

“Then what did you find?”

Currently blinded by traitorous apple shampoo, Stan reached out with his free hand to grope for a towel to help his current predicament. The instinct didn't exactly make sense, but it's what his brain told him to do.

“I –... it might be nothing.”

Stan breathed a sigh of relief when he felt the familiar texture of a towel. He wasted no time in pressing his face against it. He held pressure against his eye, which helped the burning ebb away. He knew it was only temporary, but for now it worked.

“Stop being all cryptic, Sharon, gawl.”

Stan removed his face from the towel and submerged himself underneath the cold stream from the shower head.

“I think I found marijuana in Stan's room.”

The shock of his mother's statement immediately worked to rid him of his worry about opening his eyes. If anything, it just forced him to open them sooner. He gasped at the burning that resumed pounding in his eye, and quickly moved to press his palm over his eye again.

She what?

“You what?”

“I found one of his old pill bottles. It's full of marijuana.”

“Oh, hell no. No son of mine is going to engage in that type of behavior. Not without m –” Randy cleared his throat. Even Stan could tell he was rerouting his sentences, and he was listening in through a wall. *“Not in this house.”*

Just as such, Stan could hear his mother's skeptical look.

“Randy.” That was her warning tone. Stan knew it well. *“You wouldn't happen to know anything about this, would you?”*

“Who, me? Pft. No. Of course not.”

Stan scrubbed his hands through his soapy hair almost nervously. He began to more thoroughly rinse the shampoo out of his hair. The little warmth he had gathered in the short shower was now gone, and he honestly just wanted to get the hell out of the house before one of them tried to talk to him.

“Do you want me to talk to him?” Randy offered.

“No. You, of all people, should not confront him about this. I'll talk to him.”

Crap.

Delusory Reactions

Chapter Summary

Kyle withdrew his hands when he realized what he had done.

By the time seventh period had finished, Kyle looked practically asleep. His chin was resting in the palm of his right hand, cradling the weight of his head precariously. With his eyes shut and his shoulders slouched, he looked about ready to collapse any which way the wind blew. The sound of the bell hadn't been enough to build courage in his bones, apparently, as he had yet to move from his still position. Stan himself was tired, but not nearly to the extent Kyle was, if even the endless trampling of teenage footfall wasn't enough to stir him.

Watching the teacher out of the corner of his eye, Stan waved a hand across the four-person table towards Kyle. The only reaction he gained of that was a twitch of his friend's nose, however. He could only assume it was because of the gentle force of the air.

"Kyle," Stan whispered. Once again, no real response. More insistent this time, he waved his hand again. "*Kyle.*"

Christ. Was Kyle trying to ignore him, or was he actually just *that* exhausted?

With a huff, Stan slumped into a similar position to Kyle. He tapped his cheek, the side of his jaw burning ever so slightly with the force of the heel of his palm hitting the area. His elbow screamed in protest as something inside of it shifted uncomfortably. Fuck. Okay. Nearing the funny-bone.

Stan lifted his head and stretched out his arm. It still ached in protest of his earlier careless action, but it was gently tapering off into something more easily manageable.

Curiously, Stan looked at Kyle's notebook. The lined paper was moderately encased in doodles, from the top of the page to the rulings at the side. The actual lines meant for writing on themselves were relatively untouched from the crude drawings of Terrance and Philip and multitudinous arrays of the Star of David. Something else was there, however, in the center of the page. It wasn't anything particularly spectacular or strange, really, but Stan had to admit that he had never seen Kyle write Hebrew in any of his notebooks.

From afar, he couldn't make out very much. Not that he would be able to understand whatever he could make out, of course; the extent of his knowledge on Hebrew didn't go past the alphabet, and the niqqud (that's what the dots and lines for the vowels are called, right?) always confused the hell out of him. He knew some words here and there, too, but nothing that'd get him through any sort of conversation. Honestly, Stan wasn't entirely sure why he had even *attempted* to learn Hebrew. Kyle always got so pissed off at him when he would try

to read something over Kyle's shoulder, and the amount of eye-rolls he got from a mispronunciation was probably a world record.

His lack of proper knowledge didn't stop Stan from trying to read it, though.

After finally making out (what he could only assume to be) “*Dod*” among the letters, he gave up. Kyle rarely wrote in Hebrew. If he was writing in a language other than English, that probably meant he didn't want anyone to read it.

Stan caught a shift in the corner of his vision, and glanced over just in time to hear their teacher speak to them.

“Stan, are you and Kyle staying after today?” she asked him, straightening out a few stacks of paper on her desk. She moved to her computer.

“No,” Stan said. He glanced over to Kyle. “I don't think so, at least. I think he's just passed out.”

Her brows lifted in concern. “Do you need me to call down the nurse?”

“What – oh, no. I don't mean literally passed out, I mean – I mean asleep.”

“Oh.” She frowned. “If you say so. Let me know if you change your mind about staying after. I have a few proficiencies you can take.”

Stan snorted and prodded Kyle's notebook with the butt of his pen. “Kyle has missing proficiencies?”

“No, he's clear. You, however, have three.”

Stan practically choked on his own throat when he heard that. She payed him no mind, favoring instead to type something up on her computer. Although still recovering from the shock of his three missing proficiencies, he was able to pull himself together enough to tap Kyle on the wrist with his pen. Unsurprisingly, Kyle didn't react. There wasn't so much as a hesitation in his breathing. His eyelids remained loosely shut; his shoulders remained relaxed in a painfully perfect posture. He was approximately *this* close to looking totally dead. Stan wondered how accurate that was.

Not for too long, though. He was patient, but not this patient. Stan submitted to his natural will to keep moving, shoving his notebooks and pencils into his backpack. He stood and slung the rucksack over his shoulder, before rounding the table and prodding the side of Kyle's head with his palm. Kyle reacted immediately, eyes tearing open as he retaliated with his own, much harsher, prod. Stan hissed when Kyle threw his elbow straight into the flesh just above his hip.

“Dude!” Stan exclaimed.

“Fuck you!” Kyle replied.

“Language, Mr. Broflovski,” quipped the teacher.

Kyle shot a glare to Stan. “Sorry, ma'am,” he apologized. He draped his arm protectively over the writing in his notebook, hiding it as he flipped it shut. Every so often, he would intensify the glares that he shot to Stan. He forced himself up, hooked his backpack over both shoulders, and nudged the chair in with his knee.

They left the classroom. Every hit of their feet against the tile drew them just that much closer to the school's exit. Stan couldn't wait to get out of this stupid building; his backpack dug deeper and deeper into his shoulder with every bounce of his step. It bore into him the same way guilt did.

“I have three proficiencies,” Stan said. Kyle looked at Stan with a strange expression.

“Huh?”

“Proficiencies. I have three of them unfinished.”

“You've been absent three days in a row?”

“No.”

“Holy shit. You got a zero on *all three*?” When Stan didn't reply, Kyle continued with a groan. “What the hell happened to all of the study material I gave you?”

Stan cleared his throat. “The – the what?”

“*Study material*. Y'know. The *study guides*. That literally told you, *step by step*, how to do it.”

“Oh. That.”

“I swear to all that's holy, if you say – ”

“I lost it.”

“Oh my *fucking* – !” Kyle stopped dead in his tracks. He brought his hands to his face, and dug his fingertips into his brow. Stan slowed to his own stop a few seconds later, turning to watch his friend deal with the stress of stupidity by proxy. He could hear Kyle quietly counting under his breath from ten to one, which was almost definitely something the counselor told him to try.

Stan decided to try his luck speaking. “Um – ”

“You're coming over.”

“...what.”

Kyle lifted his head out of his hands and repeated, “you're coming over. Right now, after school. I don't care if you have plans, you're canceling them. We need to fix your bullshit.”

Stan glanced around the empty hallways. “Uh – ”

“Nope. Nope, nope, nope. There's no fucking way I'm standing idly by, while *your sorry ass* – ” Kyle jabbed a pointer finger accusingly towards Stan, “ – heads towards flunking at the speed of fucking light... and your *stupid backpack is unzipped!*”

With an angry growl, Kyle shoved Stan's shoulder to turn him around. Stan obeyed Kyle's motions, not willing to push him too much. Kyle was already running extremely short on patience, it seemed, and Stan wasn't sure if that was because he was having a bad day, or if it was because his ten minute power-nap had been interrupted. The darker-than-normal circles under Kyle's eyes suggested the latter. He felt Kyle's fingers work passionately at the zipper on his rucksack's largest pocket.

“You don't sort anything other than your dumb bedroom,” Kyle huffed. He grunted in an attempt to shut it around the miscellaneous crap Stan kept in it. “Your backpack looks like my brother's, and he's twelve.”

“Are you calling me a genius?” Stan asked.

Kyle scoffed. “You wish!” With one final tug, Stan's backpack finally relented. It closed with a sharp *ziiip*. “There! Christ. We're sorting through *this* bullshit when we get to my place, too.”

“Dude. Why are you so mad?”

“I'm not mad,” Kyle replied. Stan bristled when Kyle brushed off Stan's shoulders. It was a weird action – the type a mom would give her son when prepping to leave for church. In fact, he distinctly remembered his *own* mother doing the exact same thing to him when he was a kid. She'd fix the collar on his suit jacket, then brush the lint (whether it existed or not) off of his shoulders. Granted, she'd never done it from behind him, but it was the same thing in principle.

Kyle withdrew his hands when he realized what he had done. Stan turned to look at him.

“Sorry – sorry. Habit,” he apologized. He rubbed his hands together. In some ways, he looked like he was trying to wipe the memory of the action off of his palms. His eyes met Stan's. Kyle explained, “I've been the one sending Ike off to school these past few weeks.”

“Oh,” Stan said. He watched Kyle. Kyle clasped his hands together, and brought them up to his mouth. It was similar to that of prayer. Something emotional lingered, though. Something so sensitive, Stan knew he shouldn't touch it with a sixty foot pole.

Stan was bad at listening to common sense.

“Doesn't your mom usually do that?” Stan asked.

“Yeah,” Kyle said. He brought his hands back down, and wiped his palms on the front of his jacket. “But she hasn't been able to.”

Stan furrowed his brows.

“I mean – ” Kyle cut off. He lifted one of his hands up to his mouth again, picking at a chapped area of his lips. “She's been... she's been offered a really big job opportunity. She's been away. Trying to work things out. You know how it goes.”

Stan was quiet for a beat. “Right. Yeah. Of course.”

Kyle nodded. “So... is that yours?” He pointed towards a crumpled piece of notebook paper. It was on the ground underneath Stan's foot, and a tear threatened to rip it in two even halves.

“Oh – jeez. Yeah, probably.” Stan lifted his foot and picked up the piece of ruined paper. He unfurled the corners. It was covered in writing – all of which he recognized, but none of which was his. “Or not.”

“Then we should throw it away – ”

“It's Cartman's.”

“Huh?”

“It's Cartman's. Cartman wrote it. This is his handwriting.”

Kyle didn't hesitate in saying, “burn it.”

“What?”

“Burn it. I don't care what it is. He doesn't need it.”

“Or...” Stan looked back at the very piece of paper in his hands. “We could read it.”

Kyle seemed to ponder this for a moment. “Or we could do that. C'mon. Read it as we walk.”

Stan nodded. The two of them began on their way down the hall again. Amid the taps of their feet, and the sounds of a meeting being held in one of the nearby offices, Stan began to read directly from the paper in his hands. “*'Guess what motherfuckers?'* – and, uh, then in parentheses, *'What Eric?'*”

Kyle heaved a sigh. “I regret this decision already.”

“*'Well, Polly Prissy Pants'* – oh, Jesus, it's one of these,” Stan muttered. He looked away from the paper long enough to hold the school's main door open for Kyle. He reluctantly turned his attention to the letter once they were outside. “*'Well, Polly Prissy Pants, I just got offered a full ride to NYU'* – ”

“What?” Kyle hissed, looking at Stan incredulously.

“*'Oh wow Eric'* – ” Stan continued, “this is in parentheses, by the way – *'that is so awesome. You are so smart and cool and totally not fat at all. Everyone is so proud of you and that jew Kyle won't know what hit him when he sees you there'* – end parenthesis – *'Thank you, Polly Prissy Pants. Kyle will be sooo pissed off. Maybe'* – spelled without a 'y' – *'he'll cry. Nya nya nya nya nyaa nya... ha ha ha ha haa ha.'*”

When Stan finally lowered the piece of paper to gauge his friend's reaction, he found himself a little taken aback to find Kyle's face so pale.

“Um... Kyle?”

“He didn't.”

“Didn't what?”

And just like that, the color in Kyle's cheeks was back, flushing his skin with a vengeance. “Get a full ride. He's a liar. He's a fucking liar and a fucking thief, and a fucking cheater. He will never succeed that way. It can't be possible. So, I'm telling you, there is absolutely no *fucking* way he got a *full ride* to NYU. There's no way.”

Stan looked at the crumpled piece of paper. He studied the writing. He acknowledged the points where loops should be on Cartman's 'g's and 'y's. He read through the 'nyanyahaha' portion at the bottom, over and over again. “I don't know, man. This *is* Cartman we're talking about.”

Kyle looked around the view of the neighborhood. The streets and driveways were lined with a moderately thick blanket of snow. Kyle's eyes were glued in the direction of the basket ball court. “Do you think he's there?” he asked.

“Where?” Stan replied. “The court? Oh, hell no. You're not seriously thinking about confronting him about it, are you?”

“Wouldn't *you*?” Kyle quipped. “If he was planning on ruining the *entirety* of your educational career, wouldn't *you* push for answers?”

“If by '*pushing for answers*' you mean '*beating the ever-loving fuck out of him*', then no. I wouldn't.”

“Well – ” Kyle cut off. He shot a lasting glare towards the hill. Just beyond the trees was the basket ball court. Since it was Monday, it was almost undeniable that Kenny and Cartman were there. The look on Kyle's face was as easy to read as an opened children's book. He was thinking about it. More than that, he was talking himself into it.

“Dude. Kyle. No.”

“But – ”

“No. It's not worth it. Trust me on this.” Stan reached out to grip Kyle's shoulder. “We've been through so much Cartman bullshit. I'm honestly really confused. Why is this the thing that pisses you off?”

“Because he's always there,” exclaimed Kyle. “He's always there! Things are changing, and I don't want *him* to be the *only* constant in my life! I don't want him to be everywhere I am. Is that too much to ask?”

“No, of course not,” Stan said. “But immediately jumping on his back about it isn't going to help. If anything, it's just going to convince him to pursue it even more. Seriously, dude. Don't.”

Kyle's face flushed a deeper shade of red. “I don't want to go to college with him.”

“Then don't. You could always go somewhere else. You're smart enough to get into any school you want to. Okay?” Stan tipped his head forward so his gaze was more direct with Kyle's. In the few seconds after what Stan had said, Kyle gave a gentle nod.

“Okay. Yeah.” Kyle drew his bottom lip between his teeth. The pink skin was spotted red with areas that had been bitten through in consistent worrying. Some red areas were new, Stan noted. They had been bleeding recently. The stress of Mrs. Broflovski's new job must really be getting to Kyle.

Stan felt slightly self-conscious when he saw Kyle glance towards his mouth. The feeling only grew when he realized just how long he'd been looking at Kyle's. Christ. How long had they been standing there? And when did Stan grab both of Kyle's shoulders? When had Kyle gotten so close?

Uh oh.

Uh oh.

They both pulled away from each other at the same time, hearts pounding and minds reeling at the thought of what could have just happened. Stan could only process the thoughts that thanked God for not letting that happen. He couldn't fuck up his relationship with Wendy any further than he already had. They were already too fragile to handle even the simplest issues. They'd broken up about as many times as Stan's parents had, and he didn't think he could handle it again.

“Sorry,” Stan muttered.

“It's fine, let's just... let's go to my place now,” Kyle said. “Okay?”

“Actually – ” Stan could see the brief second of panic in Kyle's eyes. He quickly continued. “Could we stop at my place first? I gotta grab something real quick.”

“Sure, I guess...” Kyle replied. When Stan began to walk, he followed. “What do you need to grab?”

“My textbook.”

Kyle deadpanned. “You're shitting me.”

The Misnomer of Good Deeds

Chapter Summary

Kyle didn't frown, but his expression morphed into something that said he wanted to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Wait, hold on.” Stan pressed his finger to a portion inside of his textbook. His brows knitted together in something akin to concentration – though, honestly, it was more like confusion. He'd already tried to wrap his head around the concept of genetics and cells and all that. So far, nothing was clicking. From the annoyed noise that he heard Kyle make, Stan could tell his friend was just as frustrated as he was himself. “Kyle, explain this to me again.”

“Dude, it's really not that hard to understand,” Kyle replied. He didn't look up from his own work. He'd been breezing through the questions in his study guides like they were nothing but simple arithmetic. It was starting to piss Stan off. With one final swirl of his pencil led against the paper, Kyle turned his attention to Stan's lost expression. “Genes have alleles. Alleles decide traits. Traits show up in babies from the genetics of the parents.”

The explanation caused Stan to roll his eyes in response. “No, I understand that. What I don't understand is the whole deal with... codominance, or whatever the fuck.”

Kyle set his notebook aside on his desk and rolled his desk chair over to where Stan was seated. The textbook (and easily six different papers, none of which were related) Stan was studying was sprawled out on Kyle's bed, and just as such, so was Stan. He sat with his legs crossed, a pillow in his lap to hold his notebook (a pillow was a horrible substitute for a desk, by the way). After a split second of criticizing Stan's workplace layout, Kyle leaned forward in his desk chair and rested his elbows on his knees. His shins pressed awkwardly against the side of his mattress. “The hell are you even working on right now, dude? I can't tell which paper you're looking at.”

“Well, I mean, technically, I'm looking at all of them,” Stan answered. He reached out to scrape one specific paper off of the bedspread. He waved it in a relatively grand gesture through the air as he added, “but *this* is the one. Jeez, Kyle, I would have thought you'd know which paper was which. Y'know, considering you made these, and all.”

Without adjusting his vocal tone, Kyle quipped, “I think it makes sense that I don't know which one is which. Y'know, considering I don't use them, and all.” Needless to say, Stan shut up pretty quick after that. He couldn't get a one-up in this situation. He went back to studying the study guide in hand. He had to admit, these little things were pretty dang handy. They explained the concepts Stan struggled with in simple language – well, in the simplest

language Kyle was physically capable of using, at least. Abruptly, Kyle removed the paper from Stan's hands. The intensity of his eyes burned brighter as he began to read through the study guide. Kyle made a face. "I don't get it. What're you having issues understanding?"

"Did I literally not just say '*codominance*'?"

"No, I know what you said," Kyle replied. "I just don't get why it's so hard for you to understand it."

"Okay, fine, it says –" Stan furrowed his brows, taking the study guide back from Kyle. A quick skim of the paragraphs resulted in Stan finding what he was looking for, and he quickly jabbed his finger at the line. "Here, see, it says, '*in codominance, no dominant or recessive alleles are present*'. But, then, how the hell is something going to present either trait at that point? Like, if there are no markers, it's nothing. Right? Is it just gonna be a total coin toss? Like, is it a wild card?"

Kyle rolled his eyes. "No, Stan. It's not a wild card – and everything in genetics is technically a coin toss."

"Stop with the technicalities, dude," Stan groaned. "Just explain the stupid thing so I can pass the proficiencies."

"Okay, okay, damn." Kyle rolled his chair backwards so he had enough room to stand. He quickly moved to sit next to Stan on the bed, pushing a few papers and study guides aside so he wouldn't crush them as he settled. He took the study guide out of Stan's hand, and set it down on the bed in front of both of them. Kyle then turned to face him. "Alright. So, I can empathize with the fact that codominance can be kind of confusing at first, but it's honestly not complicated. Basically, codominant alleles means there's no one marker that rules over all others. The one example in humans is blood type."

Stan didn't respond to that with anything other than a quiet, "what."

Kyle sighed. "Blood type. If both parents pass down just the *i* allele without the predetermining A or B markers, the *i* allele causes the baby's blood type to be O. This is because there was no dominant or recessive A or B mixing in with the *i*. Does that make sense?"

"Um..." Stan trailed off. "Sure?"

"Okay. So, if the exact opposite happens, and one parent passes down an I^A allele, while the other parent passes down an I^B allele, their baby will have the AB blood type."

And just like that, it began to make just a *little* more sense. Quietly, Stan made a noise of understanding, nodding his head as the information processed. He lowered his head to watch his pencil write a few notes across his composition book paper. "So, a kid with two I^A alleles would have blood type A?"

A smile began to spread on Kyle's face. "Exactly. And the opposite is true with I^B ."

“What other things have the whole codominance thing?” asked Stan. For that question, Kyle pursed his lips – though he quickly began to respond.

“Well, a lot of different species of plants and animals experience codominance in their genes, but one example I like to use is in flowers, since it's a visible display of codominance in the colors of their petals,” Kyle explained. “It also ties in later with incomplete dominance, but we don't have to get into that right now if this is still confusing – ”

“Wait, wait, wait. Let me get this straight.” Stan held up both of his hands, his pencil falling from between his fingers. After he was sure he had gained Kyle's attention, he clapped them both together and gestured towards Kyle with them. “You have the AB blood type. Right?”

Kyle furrowed his brows, tilting his head down. “Um... yeah?”

“So that means you have a codominant trait,” Stan said.

Again, Kyle responded with a confused, “yeah?”

“And flowers have codominant traits,” Stan added.

Kyle's expression gained a more thoroughly confused tinge. It mixed with his muscles and made his brows twitch further downwards. Stan noticed this, and raised his own brows in response. Kyle repeated his previous response of “yeah.”

“So, vicariously, you are the blood-relative of flowers.”

Immediately, Kyle dropped his head into his hands and groaned. “You did not just call me a flower.”

“No, no, no, hear me out,” Stan quickly insisted. “I'm serious. You have a codominant trait in your blood. Flowers don't have blood, right, but they have codominant traits based on their colors. You're already, like, ten percent more related to flowers than you are to me.”

“That's not how it works,” Kyle said. “That's literally not how it works.”

“Listen, listen, listen, it makes sense. I swear.” Stan removed the makeshift pillow-desk from his lap and set it aside on Kyle's bed. Free from the pillow, Stan turned to face Kyle fully. “It would explain why your hair looks like a dandelion.”

Kyle's dissatisfaction was highly concentrated in his vocal (though not verbal) protest. His shoulders slumped as he let out the air in his lungs with yet another exasperated groan. Stan lifted his hand to flick one of the red curls on top of Kyle's head.

“I mean, where did it even come from? Neither of your parents have curly hair.”

“What!” Kyle lifted his head from his hands, his face red with something Stan could only assume to be irritation. “Have you actually never met my dad? His hair is almost as curly as mine.”

Stan knew he should start to back off at this point. The last thing he wanted was to make Kyle blow a gasket somewhere – but he couldn't deny that it was kind of amusing to get him so riled up with something that's, in all actuality, quite simple. Stan drew in a long breath, and then proceeded to push it out in a heavy sigh. He reached over and patted Kyle's shoulder.

Time for the finishing blow.

"I'm sorry, Kyle," Stan began. "But your dad is a dandelion."

Kyle stared at Stan incredulously. He hardly blinked in the moment after Stan had finished speaking. Soon enough, something at the corners of his mouth began to twitch – and then, Kyle began to laugh. "What the hell!" he exclaimed, bowing his head as he tried to regain control of himself. "Are you high? Did you medicate before you got here? Is that why you're being so weird? Is that why you took so long to get your stupid textbook?"

"What? No," Stan replied. He withdrew his hand from Kyle's shoulder. He began to gather up some of the study guides that lay around them on the bed, setting the unnecessary ones aside. "Why would I smoke before I came over? And I *told* you, it took so long for me to get it, because I couldn't find it."

"How do you lose a biology textbook? It's literally over a thousand pages of information. Have you seen this thing?" Kyle gestured towards the aforementioned textbook. "It's huge."

"Yeah, it's huge – and are you kidding? Information my ass. It's over a thousand pages of *bullshit*, that's what it is," Stan said. He lifted up the biology textbook, making a show of how heavy it was. He groaned, "oh man, dude, it's so heavy. It's gonna kill me."

"Then set it down," laughed Kyle, batting at Stan's arm. Stan ignored him, continuing to complain about its weight.

"Holy shit, it's like trying to carry Cartman," Stan said. "I can't take it anymore. It's gonna crush me. I'll be splattered all over your bed. It'll look like something straight out of *Mars Attacks* – but red."

"Gross. I hated that movie."

"Would you rather I compared it to *Chopping Mall*?" Stan asked. He shifted the textbook in his grip, moving so he was holding it against his chest rather than balancing it on his palms in the air. "*Deadly Friend*? *Scanners*?"

"Dude, stop listing eighties movies to me," Kyle said. He jabbed Stan in the side with his elbow, causing Stan to startle and drop the textbook into his lap. Unfortunately, it landed upright. Stan winced when it toppled and hit him in the stomach, too. He flopped backwards on Kyle's bed, the textbook forgotten and sliding slowly off his torso. Holy damn. That hurt.

"Christ, ow," Stan muttered.

"Oh, come on. It didn't hit you that hard," Kyle huffed. He pushed the textbook fully off of Stan. When Stan did little other than make another soft groaning noise, he jabbed his fingers

against Stan's ribs. That action made Stan react – he heaved a laugh and rolled over onto his side. He curled in on himself. Kyle snorted.

“Don't poke me like that,” Stan complained lightheartedly. He pushed himself up using his arms, and he kept himself propped up with his palm pressed against the mattress.

“You're an idiot,” Kyle said. Even so, his tone was nothing but loving.

“Yeah, well...” Stan shrugged, adjusting himself to sit regularly. He crossed his legs, comfortable. “Like father like son, I guess.”

Kyle didn't frown, but his expression morphed into something that said he wanted to. His brows dipped down at the edges in something sympathetic. They were looking each other in the eyes, in that moment, and something depressingly mature reared its ugly little head into the atmosphere. Both of them were trying to push it away – they were trying so desperately to make things go back to the way they *used* to be. They were trying so hard to make everything fall back into its easy little place, like when they were kids and they melted plastic toys using a magnifying glass and the sun's rays.

It was risky, Stan realized. It was risky to sit here like this, staring at each other like they could read each other's thoughts. It was risky, because they'd been to places in each other's psyche that neither had ever dared to imagine just weeks ago. A piece of Stan felt ruined, honestly. It felt melted, like those plastic toys, and Kyle was the stupid sun. It was so warm, and he wanted to feel it again. He wanted to lose himself in Kyle. He wanted to wrap himself up in his arms, and forget about the world.

He wanted to kiss Kyle, but he didn't want it to go anywhere, and that's when things became scary. Because – because, as soon as it averted itself from a stupid, hormonal lust, it became something *real*, and it couldn't be real. It couldn't. He had a girlfriend. He had a *girlfriend*, for fuck's sake, and here he was, looking more affectionately into Kyle's eyes than he had into Wendy's in years. *Years*. It had been years since he'd felt this way towards Wendy. He couldn't even remember the last time he *called* her.

Maybe that's where the temptation came from. A guilty blame of his girlfriend – who had been nothing but loving towards him in the first few years of their relationship. It had devolved into something meaningless. They'd grown apart, Stan told himself. Wendy and Stan had grown apart, and although they'd never formally broken up – surely she was doing the same thing, with someone else, right now? Surely she was dating someone else. Surely he wasn't the only one feeling this way. Surely he wasn't the one in the wrong.

Something in Stan's chest began to squeeze. It was warm, and comfortable in one of the most uncomfortable ways. His brain worked in overdrive as he counted Kyle's eyelashes, and the flecks of brown in his green eyes, and the strands of hair that lay loose against his forehead. He wanted to say sappy things like *I'm so glad we're friends*, and *Thank you for being there*, and *You're so fantastic*.

Stan leaned in to kiss Kyle with the thought of *I love you*, and his heart almost shattered when Kyle pushed him away.

“No, stop,” Kyle said. His head was tipped down, and looking as far to the right as he comfortably could. His fingers curled in Stan's shirt, holding Stan at arm's length, and refusing to let him get closer. All at once, Kyle turned his head to look at Stan, his mouth drawn down in a scowl as he hissed, “I'm still fucking mad at you.”

Stan's breath escaped him. He wanted, so badly, to try and justify everything that this was, but he knew – even if it was subconscious – that he couldn't apologize his way out of this. He'd said things he regretted, and now he was facing the consequences. He swallowed his words and backed up, allowing Kyle his space. “I'm sorry,” he tried, but Kyle wouldn't hear it. Kyle turned his back to Stan, and took a few minutes to sit in silence.

That silence was broken when they heard the house's front door open. Immediately, Kyle stood, brushing wrinkles out of his shirt. “That's probably my dad. He was planning on getting groceries today. I'm gonna see if he needs help,” Kyle said. Something weird was in his voice. Something hopeful – not necessarily like he *didn't* believe what he had said, but more like he didn't *want* to believe what he was saying. Stan was confused, but he decided not to question him. He'd already left the room, anyway. Stan could hear his footsteps trail off as he descended the stairs.

He listened for a few minutes after Kyle left. He kept his ears open for any overheard conversation – or, any noises that could alert Stan to Kyle's return. Those minutes passed, however, and Stan heard nothing. He heard the creaks of the house settling, and he heard gentle padded footsteps immediately below him in the kitchen, but it was otherwise quiet.

Stan's ears were ringing, and it made his head hurt.

He saw his backpack out of the corner of his eye, abandoned on its side in the corner near Kyle's closet. Stan had left it there for a reason, and that reason made his gut twist. He lingered for a moment as he slid to the edge of the bed. This could fuck everything up. What he was about to do could fucking ruin their friendship – but Stan was a coward. He was cowardly in the way that meant he couldn't back down in fear of personal repercussions.

Stan was quiet as he stalked over to his backpack, and when he got to it, he crouched down and shielded the bag with his body. He tried to keep it casual, even though no one was watching. He didn't want it to look suspicious in case Kyle came back before Stan was expecting him to. Just in case he was asked, Stan thought of an excuse. *My pencil jammed, I was looking for another one.*

Slowly, Stan found the thing he'd been looking for. Just to go the extra mile, Stan took off his hat and stuffed the item into it. He felt disgusting, but at the same time, he felt it was necessary. He had to force himself over to Kyle's dresser. He had to force himself to open the drawer completely. He had to force himself to remove the item from his hat so he could hide it in the back of Kyle's sock drawer. It's fine, he told himself as he buried the item underneath Kyle's socks. He shoved it further back, as far as it would go – surely, no one would find it there. Surely, surely, surely not.

His lungs shook in spasm as he pushed the dresser drawer shut. Did he hide it well enough? What if Kyle found it? What would he think? Stan backed away from the dresser, scrubbing his face with his hands.

He thought about the item: a bag full of weed. Whether it be debris from previous smokes, or that stupid pill bottle that held his dad's stash – all of it was in that bag. Everything that he had tossed into his trashcan, every speck of paper and plant – it was all inside of that bag, and that bag was now inside of Kyle's dresser, underneath an array of bundled socks. He felt like he was framing his best friend for murder. He tried to tell himself this wasn't wrong. This was just – temporary. It's a temporary hiding spot, and as long as Kyle doesn't know about it, it's fine. What Kyle doesn't know can't hurt him – and if Stan's parents don't find any remnants of weed inside of Stan's room, he won't be punished for smoking it. He won't be sent to any juvenile addiction anonymous, or a turn-around camp for troubled kids – Jesus, do those things even *exist*?

Oh, Christ, what the hell had he done? What was he *doing*? He couldn't do this. He couldn't fucking do this. He was going to bail. That's it. He's bailing. He's not risking Kyle getting in trouble for something he hadn't even *done*.

Just as Stan was about to open the dresser to remove the bag of weed, Kyle entered the room again. Immediately, Stan withdrew his hands, crossing his arms over his chest in one of the guiltiest fucking stances he could *possibly* do right now, *fuck*.

“False alarm, it was just Ike. He spilled cranberry juice all over his uniform – ” Kyle cut off and gave Stan a weird look. His brows were furrowed as he paused, still holding the doorknob in his hand. Kyle tilted his head and asked, “what are you doing?”

Tell him. Stan swallowed. *No.* “My pencil, uh – ” His voice stopped working for a second. His head throbbed, and he tried to continue. “ – I was looking for another one.”

The weird look never left Kyle's face. “Why? What happened to it?”

“It jammed,” Stan said hurriedly. “It jammed, I – so I was looking, y'know. For another.”

Kyle glanced towards his dresser, and Stan could feel himself start to sweat. “You were looking for another pencil,” he said skeptically.

“Yes,” replied Stan.

“In my dresser?” Kyle asked.

“What? Oh – God. Right, yeah. Sorry. I saw drawers and my brain immediately thought, 'pencils'.” That lie came out almost too easily. It made Stan feel sick. He forced himself to laugh. “You said it yourself. I'm an idiot.”

Kyle's own laugh sounded just as forced as Stan's. Their eye contact was interrupted every few seconds, as Kyle continued to give wary glances towards his dresser. “Yeah, man. You're an idiot. The extra pencils are in my desk drawers.”

“Right. Thanks.” Stan turned his back to the dresser and made his way slowly over to Kyle's desk. He heard Kyle close his bedroom door. Silently, Stan begged Kyle to look through the top drawer. His brain begged Kyle to confront him about how weird he was being. His brain

was desperately trying to give as many signs as it could, stalling as his hands rummaged through Kyle's desk to find a pencil.

Please, please, please. Demand me to tell you what I was actually doing. Just ask. See through my bullshit. Please. Ask me. Just ask me, just ask me, just ask me –

But when his fingers closed around a mechanical pencil –

– *ask me, ask me, ask me, ask me, ask me* –

– and he heard Kyle sit down on the bed –

– *ask ask ask ask ask ask ask ask* –

– he knew Kyle wouldn't.

Chapter End Notes

fun fact: i used the word "codominance/codominant" 12 times in this chapter
comments / feedback / constructive criticism ; all is welcome!

Out In Colorado, pt. 2

Chapter Summary

He heard everything.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Stan was guilty. He was guilty, and that agonizing feeling of *knowing* the rightful end of his hypothetical sentence was almost more than he could bear. It tore at the edges of his ears, scraped at the outline of his body like he was nothing but a cardboard cutout in some sad person's window. In some ways, on some days, he felt like that was the exact thing he was – just some inanimate object, thrown in sight of the outside world just for show. He would have done something meaningful if he were a protagonist at this point, and of that, he's certain.

Unfortunately, he couldn't mope his way out of this. He was stuck on the couch, staring at his mom as she watched him tap his knee dumbly with his index finger. Her arms were crossed over her chest, her brown sweater creasing in a way similar to her face. Her brows were raised in an expectant expression. She was doing her damndest to get Stan to fess up to something he *had* done, but refused to confirm. At that point, it was a battle of wills. Stan knew that. He wasn't stupid.

“Stanley,” she finally said, her voice just barely on the edge of chiding. “I found something concerning in your room this morning.”

All Stan replied with was “oh”, all semi-questioning in the way someone would if they really didn't give a shit. Ultimately, that was because he didn't. He couldn't give less of a damn. Except, he could. The guilt crawled up his legs and made them tickle and burn like he'd stood on an anthill. Cowardice at its finest, undoubtedly. He was the opposite of confident, and that would be his downfall, if his mother so chose to believe her son could be capable of something like that. From her body language, he could tell she would easily take the bait. She was reluctant, but she was open.

“Mind telling me what I might have found?” she asked. Stan shrugged his shoulders, so loose in his seat that he actually slid down a little further on the couch. Sharon's brows furrowed ever so slightly, and she adjusted her weight from one leg to the other. That was something Stan had never understood. Why do girls do that? Why do they pop their hip out and put all their weight on one leg? Is it the way their hips are built? Is it just more comfortable? He had no fucking idea.

Then again, it wasn't just a girl thing. He'd seen Kyle adopt that exact same position multiple times before. It was few and far between, but it happened often enough that he had it

ingrained into his memory. The way his foot planted firmly into the ground, the way he'd rest his hand on his hip, or cross his arms over his chest, exactly like his mother was doing, if he was that irritated. Stan remembered the way Kyle's nose would scrunch just a tinge whenever he furrowed his brows. He remembered the way Kyle would roll his eyes – always towards the top right corner. Always. And the contrast to that was his smile... fuck, his smile. His nose scrunched a little when he smiled wide enough, too. Every time Stan saw it, he knew he'd need to make it happen again. God, he'd give his *life* to keep Kyle happy forever.

And he'd fucked it up. Stan Marsh had planted marijuana inside of Kyle's sock drawer. If Kyle found it, their friendship was over with. If his *parents* found it, then Kyle would be even more pissed. Fuck, what if his *parents* find it? And then they'll confront him about it – Stan knew how bad Mrs. Broflovski was. All of the stress of weed on top of such a big job opportunity couldn't be helping. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, he'd fucked up so bad, so bad –

No. Stan's breath hitched as he forced it to filter into his lungs. *Fuck it. I don't care.* The thoughts broke into his skull without his permission. Just thinking them made him feel horrible. Like Kyle knew his thoughts. Like Kyle could *hear* what he was *thinking*. It was a deep, dark, cavernous hole. His brain was full of thoughts that weren't even his, but, fucking *dammit*, he couldn't help it.

“Stanley,” Sharon said again. Stan broke himself out of his guilt long enough to reply.

“I don't know,” he said. When her brows furrowed deeper, he continued. “I don't know what you found in my room, Mom. Last I checked, there wasn't anything in there.”

Something weird fluttered over her face. God, what was it with people and weird facial expressions lately? “Really?” she said. Her hands slowly loosened their grips on her arms. “No weed?”

Stan made a fake, lie of a confused face. “What? Where am I supposed to find weed? I don't have the money to buy it off some creep on the streets, and I have no idea how to get a fake ID –” she shot him a look as he said this, and he quickly added, “– not that I would *get* a fake ID if I knew how. I'm just saying.”

“So, if I looked in your room right now, I wouldn't find anything?”

“No, you wouldn't find anything.”

Sharon drew in a breath through her nose, her nostrils flaring. She kept her eyes on him, watching his every movement like a hawk. Stan had never been one to feel like he was being watched, whether he was or wasn't – but right then, right there? Hell, he felt like God himself would break through the ceiling and rip him apart in some disgusting turn of events. He'd deserve it, probably. “Fine,” she finally said, uncrossing her arms. She backed up just a bit from the couch. “Come with me. I'm going to look.”

“Okay,” Stan said, but his brain was begging Jesus Christ that she wouldn't look too closely. He was almost certain he'd gotten everything out of the trash can, but that was just the trash can. There were things hiding in the ancient depths of his room, that he'd hoped no one would ever find. He was terrified of what she'd do if she found them.

Even so, he stood. He couldn't *not* stand. If he didn't stand, that'd be admitting defeat, and if he admitted defeat, she'd know. He wouldn't know how, or why, but she'd know. Just with one firm look into his eyes, she'd peel back the layers of his brain and find out everything. Every secret, every lie, everything he'd used to tear himself apart over the years. She'd know more about him than he did, and he *knew* that was fucking *irrational*, but he couldn't *help it*. *He couldn't help it*.

Stan followed her upstairs. He traced his fingers over the banister; he imagined himself leaving a trail of himself behind. He imagined the future, when the house was old and decrepit and falling apart at the seams. Would the house remember him living here? Would the people who came to live here after he'd left, care that he'd exist at all? Would his room be used for some other kid? Would they know how much history was in this house? Of course fucking not, it's just a stupid house.

Stan lingered in the doorway of his own bedroom as his mom stepped in. Surprisingly enough, she made a beeline towards his trash can. She crouched down, sifted through tissues and band-aids. He found it gross, but she didn't think twice. And when she found nothing, she searched harder. She searched more thoroughly. She unfolded every paper, looked inside every broken mechanical pencil, dumped out the contents of the trash can. She was still when she found nothing. It kind of freaked Stan out, honestly. Just how much was this affecting her?

In a parallel to earlier, the silence was broken when the front door clicked open. Stan could hear Randy downstairs, whistling casually, twirling his keys around his fingers like he always did. Quiet thunks and hums of Lorde songs echoed up the stairs, though he didn't come upstairs to join them. He probably hadn't even realized Stan and Sharon were home, at this point. He was probably going straight towards their fridge to grab a beer. The thought made Stan feel ill. Stan had never been a beer person – those tastes from his childhood were weak and unsatisfactory. ~~He'd always been a whiskey guy~~ Overall, he could do without.

Sharon stood up from his floor. She didn't look at him as she said, “Stay here. I'll be back soon.” She bounced her hands in the air near her sides, like she was trying to make sense of the world. He watched her push past him and walk down the hallway. Stan didn't linger to watch her descend the stairs. He heard her footsteps thump to the living room, and once he was sure she wasn't nearby, Stan stepped into his room and closed the door behind him.

Stan turned his attention to his trash. It was everywhere on the floor, scattered in a small pile right next to his nightstand. He wanted to be mad at his mother for leaving him a pile of used tissue and crumpled paper to clean up, but he couldn't. Not in good conscious, at least. Then again, he hadn't really been the poster child for a good conscious lately, had he?

He didn't complain as he scooped the garbage back into the pail. He became a little annoyed when he heard his parents suddenly start shouting at each other from downstairs. He'd flinched, accidentally knocking it over again and losing all of his progress.

Stan pressed his tongue against the backs of his front teeth and started again. One piece of paper at a time, he came closer to being able to crawl into bed and pretend this whole fucking day had never happened.

It took him twenty minutes to clean. It took him twenty minutes, because every time he'd get there, their shouting would get just the *slightest* bit louder, and it'd make him startle. His progress would be lost. It'd scare him just a little more, and he'd try to fix his stupid repetitive fuck-ups faster and faster, only to mess it all up again with his stupid shaking hands, and he could *hear* them now he could *hear* their conversation like they were *right there*, like they were *right there in front of him, fighting*.

They were screaming at each other by the time he'd crawled into bed. They were so loud, directly underneath his room. He heard everything.

"Really, Randy? Stan's room? You hid your stupid stash in our son's trash can?"

"What the hell are you talking about, Sharon? I didn't do anything!"

"Like hell. It disappeared, and he didn't have the time to hide it after he found out. You're the only person who knew about it other than me, and since I didn't do it, that only leaves you!"

"I'm telling you, Sharon, I didn't do anything! Why do you keep blaming me for things I didn't do?"

"How do I know you didn't do it? You've done this stuff before! It's not like this is the first time something ridiculous has happened! You've gone extremely far to avoid the consequences of your own mistakes before, but I never expected you to frame our child!"

"Okay, yeah, I've messed up pretty bad before, but I'm here, telling you right now, I didn't do this! I didn't frame Stan, that's ridiculous!"

"That's ridiculous? No, Randy, this is ridiculous! We can't keep doing this! It's the same, ridiculous shit over and over and over."

"So what? What are we going to do? What are you trying to say?"

"Maybe we should take a break! That's what I'm saying!"

When they finally stopped shouting, the digital clock read "10:51". It flashed into his eyes with big, obnoxiously blue lettering. It was late. He didn't dare argue with himself in semantics, running in circles like something out of an obscure movie. Something from an independent film company, with shitty scripts and horrible acting, and a lot of close-ups. His right cheek was pressed against the pillow – but then again, so was his left cheek. His arm was resting, pressing it tightly against both of his ears. He just wanted to block out all of the noise, but it wouldn't go away. Even when his parents had stopped screaming at each other, he still heard it.

Stan heard it in his breathing, heaving in and out of his trachea and his lungs. The breaths came too fast, making him feel lightheaded and panicky. He hated to admit the fact that he was afraid. This had happened before. It would happen again. It would always happen again, for as long as he was alive, and he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

He sniffed through congested airways. He wheezed through the feeling of not being able to catch his breath. He thought about Kyle. His thoughts were red. Drowned and soaked in envy, of his perfect family and his perfect parents. They never fought. They never screamed at each other. Kyle's brother didn't hate his guts. Kyle made him angry. In that moment, there was nothing Stan wanted more than for Kyle to fucking understand for once. He did a whole lot of judging without trying to fucking imagine how it felt to be a bystander to his household snapping and twisting and breaking and dissolving. Stan curled into a ball on his side, trying to hide himself in the pillow. Whatever. What-fucking-ever.

His parents would be back together by morning, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

hello everyone! im very sorry for the long period of inactivity! unfortunately, life stuff got in the way. things are doing better now, however, and i'm hoping to get the next chapter out soon -- i can't promise how soon "soon" is, but i'm hoping it's a pretty soon "soon". thank you all for reading!

feedback/comments/constructive criticism; all is welcome!

cheers :)

Ignorance is Bliss

Chapter Summary

Christ, Stan had almost forgotten how weird this kid was.

When he woke up that morning, the house was quiet. Almost unnervingly so, especially after the fight his parents had the night before. There was a feeling in the air that was almost fragile in nature. Although Stan knew it was ridiculous, he couldn't help but move slower than he usually would. Every twitch of his muscle, every breath, was calculated and precise — if he hadn't known better, he'd have said he was afraid. That, of course, was where the concept lost all credibility. The idea was barely an inch long, and already he was doubtful. The house was quiet, he reminded himself. What did he have to be afraid of?

Nothing.

With a sturdy inhale, Stan gingerly swung his legs over the side of the bed and lingered where he sat. There were numbers on the clock, but they were undecipherable. His focus was shot. His eyes were heavy, already beginning to droop in the harsh light of the morning. A strange, almost distant nausea began to roll through his core, threading a distinct numbness up through his throat and jaw. The sour taste of stagnant saliva probably wasn't helping that factor.

Stan jolted, suddenly awake. He couldn't remember falling asleep, but his spine was aching where he'd begun to slouch with his body's attempt at ignoring the world. He couldn't say he blamed his brain for needing more rest. These past few days had been hectic, and the fight his parents had last night just served to shatter his already miserably torn resolve. Could he really go on like this? Was this all he'd have? Is this what life had for him? He rolled his shoulders forward, and rested his forehead in the palms of his hands. The existential questions were almost deafening — so much so, that he hardly even recognized the pain of his elbows digging into his knees.

Birds were chirping outside. They sang staccato tunes that ached in Stan's brain. Even with that being said, he couldn't bring himself to feel very annoyed by them. He didn't really feel much of anything. He was stuck in this weird, disgusting state of existentialism. It whispered to him. The most bizarre part, was that he could almost physically *hear* his own conscience. It felt real. It felt palpable. He felt like it was behind him, and he felt like he wanted to lean into it. It was an almost depressing sense of foreboding that made his bones ache in exhaustion.

He only forced himself to get ready for school when his alarm began to ring. Shrill and startling, the usual podcasts he had grown almost weirdly attached to began to blare. It spoke of the latest movies to come out. There was one he remembered hearing about the week

before. He couldn't remember what it was called, but it had been created by some independent film company that was (apparently) run by a genius writer. Maybe it was just his cynicism, but Stan had a difficult time trusting things that claimed to be run by geniuses of any sort. It was just easier to handle life without the big-dick contest of "intellectuals", or whatever they called themselves. Stan fumbled with the controls of his alarm, hitting the snooze button on accident in his disoriented state. It took him another couple of seconds or so to right the mistake — though it only served to become another mistake, in which he almost deleted the alarm altogether. The prospect of losing the station was anxiety-inducing, but it wasn't enough to wake him out of his haze.

Stan padded out of his room, casually scratching his fingers through his hair to separate the strands. It made his hair feel better, and much more clean. Unfortunately, when he caught a look at himself in the mirror, it hadn't translated nearly as well as he had thought. Instead of the natural, "I woke up like this" look he had been kind-of-not-really going for, he'd managed to gain the "I just crawled out of bed and I'm miserable" look. It could easily just be his imagination, of course; such a thing had happened before. Wendy had always been at least relatively fond of his looks. Her interest seemed to have tapered, however, and Stan couldn't help but wonder if that was due to his "unkempt aesthetic" (as Kenny called it).

A pang of sentimentality roiled up in his chest, making his spine ache. Wendy. Just thinking about her caused him to feel guilt. The nausea was back, twisting his gut and crawling at the back of his throat. He leaned over the sink, just in case this wasn't just an emotion-based symptom, but otherwise did his best to swallow back his panic. He missed her. He missed her so much. He missed the way she'd hug him, or the way she'd hold his hand, or the way she'd kiss him on the cheek. He missed the way they could lay in bed together, staring into each other's eyes. It was always cheesy when they did it, but it was the truth, and — fuck. He'd messed it up. Everything was going down the drain, and he couldn't blame anyone other than himself.

"You're a fuckhead," he said to himself, just because he wanted to. There was no emotional baggage hidden behind those words. They were just words. A sentence for him to say, to get his mind out of the horrible, exhausting hole of thought. He needed a distraction from the stupid feelings in his body. There was no better way to get rid of stupid feelings than to say something stupid and lackluster. His gaze caught on his orange pill bottle. It was where it always had been, balanced at the corner of the sink. His mom liked to leave it out, so he wouldn't forget to take them and cause his family to go through more bullshit about his "mental health". He contemplated taking them now, but the idea made his stomach churn. He felt like he'd barely be able to keep water down. Like hell he'd be able to stomach pills.

He needed to take them, though. He knew that. He —

Somewhere downstairs, a dish clattered. It made Stan startle, and fearfully, he withdrew his hand from the bottle of pills. He'd almost completely forgotten that he wasn't alone in the house. It had been so, so quiet.

Stan wished he was home alone.

Discouraged, Stan made a mental note to take them after showering. Although ultimately unmotivated, he stripped and stepped into the bath. He let his mind go blank, quiet and still as

he stood, pelted by streams of water. The pressure was different than usual, he noticed. It felt harder than it had yesterday. He tried not to focus on it.

As Stan scrubbed his hair, he pondered where his life was going. Maybe it was a bit ridiculous to think of such a topic — and, perhaps it was a bit cliché to think about such a thing while in the *shower*, of all places —, but he couldn't help it. It was weird, how patterns of thinking were almost addictive. They were such an integral part of human nature. Once you started to think one way, it was hell to break out. He tipped his head back into the water, encouraging the droplets to rinse the shampoo out of his hair. Was it that way for other people? Did other people feel addicted to the way they thought? It was such a blurry line, between being addicted and just being fucked up, that he couldn't tell what was normal and what made him different. He didn't feel different, though. He never really had. It was just — when everyone started to tell him he had changed, he felt... off.

Momentarily, he eyed the conditioner, though he decided it wasn't necessary. Not today. Any further moisturizing product would just make it look greasy. Contrary to popular belief, he wasn't a fan of looking unkempt. It was just one of those things that he couldn't always avoid, no matter how hard he tried.

He became thoroughly distracted by an asymmetrical spot on the floor as he stepped out of the shower. Water fell in uncomfortably straight patterns down his skin. The light from the window caught on them, and it made him feel exposed. He felt fragile. The last thing he wanted to do was go to school. He would have loved nothing more than to crawl back into bed and pretend nothing else in the universe existed.

Stan left the bathroom with his towel tied around his waist, and a bundle of clothing in his hands that he planned to toss into the hamper. Half-way through his decision, however, he dropped it and instead set the bundle of clothing at the foot of his bed. If he felt so inclined, he'd throw the clothing into the hamper once he got home. He didn't have the motivation to bother right now. Actually, he didn't have the motivation for much right now, anyway — it was just the idea of doing more than the bare minimum that got to him. He stifled a yawn and untied the towel. He dropped it to the floor, and stepped begrudgingly into the clothing he found buried in the depths of his dresser. When he left his room, he could hear the television going downstairs. He couldn't recognize what was playing, but his father was the only one who watched television in the morning. Admittedly, Stan was a bit disappointed in the fact that he was correct. It wasn't even eight, and they'd already made up. That had to be a record. It wasn't even twelve hours.

Abruptly, Stan stopped at the top of the stairs. He was forgetting something. He turned to look down the hallway, staring at the doorway to the bathroom. He was definitely, definitely forgetting something. Was it in the bathroom? Did he leave it in there? He turned to look at the door to his bedroom, furrowing his brows as he mulled it over. His bedroom? Was he forgetting something there? Fuck. Um... what does he need for school? Textbook, keys, notebooks, pencils... his phone. He was forgetting his phone. He made quick work of nabbing his phone from his bedroom. He had no notifications, he noticed, but he was almost five minutes later than he usually was. He made a displeased noise and thudded down the stairs. He chose to ignore the fact that his mom was probably going to be pissed at him and

nag him to “quit stomping”. When he reached the door, he kicked his shoes on and pocketed his phone. He’d just hoisted his backpack over his shoulder, when —

“Stanley,” his mother called from the kitchen. Immediately, Stan rolled his eyes. His shoulders slouched without him being particularly conscious of it, and his backpack slipped from his shoulder, back to the floor. He peaked into the kitchen.

“What?” he asked.

“Eat something for breakfast before you go,” she told him with a vague nod towards the kitchen table. She’d made oatmeal. Stan liked oatmeal, but right now, he was still fighting the nausea he’d woken up with. He wasn’t ready to eat anything this morning. He didn’t want to.

“I have a granola bar in my backpack,” he lied. “I’ll eat that.”

Sharon gave him a weird look. “I made you breakfast, and you’re not going to eat it? What’s wrong?”

“I’ll eat breakfast, I just — I’m running late, so I don’t have time.” Right on cue, his phone buzzed with a notification. Stan tugged his phone out of his pocket, and almost breathed a relieved sigh when he saw it was from Kyle.

KYLE

Today 07:32

Dude we’re running late. Where are you?

“See?” Stan said, holding his phone up in the air. He knew he was too far away from his mom for her to be able to see Kyle’s message, but the effect was the same, nonetheless. “Kyle just messaged me. He’s mad. Can I just go? If worse comes to worst, I can just grab something for breakfast in the cafeteria.”

“That’s a waste of oatmeal,” his mother argued.

“Just have Dad eat it. He likes oatmeal.”

Something in his mother’s facial expression twitched. She turned towards the sink, flicking the tap on. Her hands worked quickly in scrubbing a plate clean. “Your father isn’t here,” she stated. She looked like she was about to say something else, but she was holding back. Honestly, Stan was in disbelief. He looked behind himself, towards the couch. Sure enough, the television was on, but his father was nowhere to be seen. There were no new beer cans littered on the coffee table. His father’s shoes and coat were gone. Stan’s stomach twinged, and the nausea came back, harder and more distinct. He ducked his head, trying to swallow away the feeling.

“Oh,” was all he said. The air was extremely stiff, now, and Stan knew it was his fault. He knew he should say something else, but his airways hardly allowed him to utter just that one, noncommittal sound. His phone buzzed again to let him know he had an unseen notification,

but he ignored it. He shoved his phone back into his pocket. He waved goodbye to his mother, but she didn't see it. He left the house as soon as his backpack was over his shoulder.

Kyle was right outside Stan's house, sitting on the front step. His posture was slouched. Stan couldn't tell if that was because he was protecting himself from the almost unseasonable cold, or if it was because something had happened. When he caught a look at Kyle's reddened face, though, he knew it was because of the weather. Stan dragged the door shut behind himself, pointedly ignoring the loud slam from the action, and hopped down the steps to start his way down the driveway. The grass was caked in the kind of snow you could make snowmen out of, and the sky was brighter than it had been all week. It was an almost painfully beautiful day, and he felt like shit, because he couldn't enjoy it. Stan made an annoyed noise when Kyle jabbed him in the back with a closed fist. "Dude," Kyle said, narrowly avoiding a small patch of ice on the ground. "Don't ignore me."

"I'm not ignoring you," Stan replied. At Kyle's disbelieving look, he asked, "what, did you say something?"

Kyle narrowed his eyes. "I asked where you were. You didn't reply to my text, and you're ten minutes later than usual. We're probably going to miss first period, at this rate. Did something happen?"

Stan ignored the question. "You're overreacting. We're not going to miss first period."

"Fine, we won't miss first period. That doesn't mean you're not ignoring me."

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

Kyle stopped in his tracks. The quick halt made the slush around the cracks in the sidewalk make a quiet, wet noise. It was the kind of noise that'd be gross in any other scenario. Kyle's cheeks were burning red and flushed, making his eyes seem almost *too* vibrant. That was too much, Stan thought. It was too much for him to handle. He'd never paid attention to Kyle's eyes, and he wasn't about to start now. He couldn't. Instead, Stan was drawn to Kyle's hairline, and — he realized Kyle wasn't wearing his usual ushanka. His hair looked freshly trimmed, and almost distractingly formal. In the mess of curls, Stan saw something. It was kind of difficult to make out through the mess of curls, but it was definitely there.

"Dude, are you wearing a yarmulke?"

As soon as the words left Stan's mouth, Kyle's entire body tensed. "What? No!" he hissed, his shoulders raising just the slightest bit. Not even a moment later, Kyle reached up to feel for his hat — which, of course, wasn't there. He cursed quietly under his breath, his hand atop the skullcap as he frantically dug in his pockets. "I'm not — it's... my mom wanted me to wear it, okay?"

Stan raised his hands, palms up. "Okay, man. Jeez. I didn't realize you were going to get so defensive about it."

"I'm not *defensive*." Kyle's nose wrinkled for just a moment, his glaring expression reaching a peak before dying down. When his angry expression fell away, he was left looking tired.

There were dark circles under his eyes that Stan had noticed before, but seemed to have gotten a hundred times worse in just the past day. Finally, he managed to pull his hat out from his jacket pocket, where it had been folded into a small, condensed green lump. He twisted the hat in his hands, fidgeting almost anxiously. He smoothed the hat out, and then reached up to put it on — but Stan stopped him before he could. Kyle looked, almost shocked, at where Stan was gripping his wrist. Stan was shocked at himself, too. He wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't really sure why he'd even stopped Kyle.

"You're totally defensive," Stan said. "Why? Your mom wants you to wear it. I mean, I don't get it, but I'm not Jewish, so that comes with the territory. But, like... I also don't get why you'd wear a hat over it, if you're wearing it anyway."

Kyle remained silent.

"Is it Cartman?" Stan asked. "Are you afraid of what he'd say?"

"I'm not afraid," said Kyle. "I've never been afraid of him. I'm just... I don't want to deal with his shit today."

"If he finds out you're wearing a hat over that, he's going to have a field day. He's going to think you're, like, self-conscious about it, and he's going to make sure your life is a living hell for at least the next week." Stan let go of Kyle's wrist when he realized he had yet to do so. Kyle's grip on the hat tightened, and he tugged his hands close to his chest.

"Yes, but if he sees me just casually wearing it, he's going to make my life miserable."

"Exactly," Stan said. "Might as well go all out, right?"

Kyle's expression hardened. "Your logic is shit," he muttered.

"Sure, probably," Stan said. "But I don't think you should hide the yarmulke. Hell, it might give Cartman an aneurysm if he sees it."

"*Or* he'll terrorize me," Kyle scoffed.

"Well — yeah, okay, maybe. But..." Stan searched for the words he needed in this situation. He felt like his heart was beating twice as fast as it should be. He felt like he was treading in territory that he didn't know nearly enough about to comment on. His veins were pumped with anxiety, and it made his hands want to tremble. *You're overstepping*, his brain told him. *You're so overstepping*. "It'll... make your mom happy, right?"

In that moment, Kyle's expression fell from defensive to lost. Stan could almost see the cogs turning in his friend's head. Inevitably, Kyle was going through the lists of pros and cons. He was probably debating with himself on whether it would be worth it to suffer some (possibly very awful) shit to make his mother happy. Finally, after what felt like forever, Kyle looked into Stan's eyes and allowed a very small, very gentle questioning look. It seemed like Kyle wanted him to say something, but Stan wasn't sure what, and that freaked him out. Stan swallowed down another roll of nausea as it grew to be ten times worse than before. Just

looking at Kyle was too much. At the same time, he couldn't help but want to drown in a weirdly warm, loving feeling.

"I think it looks cute on you," Stan blurted.

Kyle's previously almost melancholic expression twitched into one of surprise. Not a moment later, he ducked his head down to stare at the hat he was clutching to his chest. Stan wondered if he was blushing. He was about to tease him, until Kyle tugged the ushanka on over the yarmulke, and began to walk briskly towards the school. Obviously, Stan's mindless remark was the wrong thing to say. Guilt filled his entire body as Stan jogged to catch up. He wanted to say he was sorry, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. Anything he would say at this point would make him sound like a total asshole. Silence was definitely the best way to go.

A couple times, Stan tried to crack a joke. The ten minute walk was almost horrifyingly long when Kyle wasn't talking to him. The logical part of Stan's brain told him that this was nothing new. Kyle got pissed off all the time — he had the cliché fiery temper of a redhead, and he was overwhelmingly stubborn. Of course he'd give people the silent treatment when he was mad. That didn't help the emotional, irrational part of him, though. It made the nausea pound higher up in his chest, causing him to feel distressed and afraid that maybe this was it. Maybe he'd fucked up too hard this time, and Kyle would ignore him forever, and everything would go to shit because Kyle was the only one who spoke to him on a regular basis anymore, and even *that* was debatable, but —

Stan stumbled to a stop when he realized they'd made it to the school. Kyle had managed to get a good ten feet ahead of him, and he only sped up the closer he got to the school's doors. The cold air was freezing his airways, and it caused Stan to wheeze quietly. In his efforts to keep up with Kyle, he was rendered breathless. A glance at his watch told him they still had ten minutes until class, so he could handle a quick pause by one of the trees in the front yard of the school. Stan leaned his shoulder against the large tree, watching his breath huff out in visible clouds from his mouth. His lungs hurt, his throat hurt, and his head hurt from the effort of drawing in a full breath. When his respiratory system began to itch with the incoming tickle of coughs, he slung the backpack off of his shoulder and crouched to dig through it. He pulled out his inhaler just in case, but so far it wasn't necessary.

He almost yelped when someone clapped a hand on his shoulder. The action was almost weirdly friendly, and it was definitely unfamiliar. None of his friends were touchy-feely, except for Butters, and... well, he wasn't really a friend. Startled, Stan looked up at the person standing beside him. It was Craig. He was wearing one of those messenger bags instead of a backpack. It was black, Stan noticed, and covered in doodles that were definitely created by those metallic sharpies. Stan would say he'd never seen it before, but that wouldn't be saying much, considering he didn't usually see Craig around all that much. They were taking very different routes in their high school career.

Quickly, Stan buried his inhaler in his backpack and zipped the pocket. He stood so they were on the same level. When Craig said nothing, Stan felt a little weirded-out. That feeling only intensified when he realized Craig was literally just staring at him, not moving. Christ, Stan had almost forgotten how weird this kid was.

“Hey — ” Stan’s voice broke off, his lungs interrupting him with a cough. He cursed under his breath, lifting the collar of his shirt up to cover his mouth and nose. It protected his lungs from the unforgiving, cold air. Just that little bit helped immensely, though he had to admit, it was difficult to talk to someone like that. He dealt with it nonetheless. Quietly, he asked, “you need something?”

“I don’t need anything,” Craig responded monotonously. “But you might.”

Stan quirked a brow. “Excuse me?”

Swiftly, Craig slid his hand into his messenger bag and withdrew his cell phone. He navigated through (what appeared to be) multiple different apps, before finally settling on one. Stan stared at him incredulously as he continued to tap on his phone. And then, suddenly, Craig held his phone out to Stan. When Stan made no moves to take the phone out of Craig’s hand, Craig said, “go ahead. Take a look.”

“This better not scar me for life,” Stan grumbled, acquiescing. He tipped his head down and squinted, trying to see the picture with the sun glaring an obnoxiously bright light in the background. Finally, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the screen, he saw it.

On the screen, there was a picture of himself and Kyle, standing outside on the sidewalk. They were in the neighborhood, nearby where the path to the park was — with a start, Stan realized it was taken yesterday. This was them, standing, practically on the verge of kissing, from yesterday. He felt his throat constrict, and his stomach did a back flip. They hadn’t kissed, he reminded himself. They’d backed away before it got too far, but... that didn’t stop the picture from making it *look* like they were already in the midst of making out. It had been taken from across the street, definitely, since Kyle’s back was turned to the camera. Stan swallowed hard, his eyes wide. He glanced up at Craig, who looked almost amused.

“Motherfucker,” Stan hissed, his grip on Craig’s phone tightening. Craig abruptly took his phone back, shut it off, and pocketed it.

“That’s not the only one, either,” Craig stated. Maybe Stan was reading too much into it, but Craig seemed vaguely proud. Like — like this was some sort of *game* for him, that he’d taken the lead in. “You two have so much sexual tension, it’s out of this world.”

“What the fuck?” Stan’s blood was running cold in his veins. Anger was boiling up and washing through his limbs, making him ache. That was fucked up, right? That was really fucked up. “That’s fucked up. You’re fucked up. Are you a stalker, or some shit?”

“No,” said Craig. “I just happen to be in the right place at the right time — or, wrong place and wrong time, from your perspective. Aren’t you still dating Wendy?”

Stan was speechless. His entire being was screaming at him that this was ridiculous. That he should tell someone, but — but then people would know. His secret, his — ... everyone would know he was cheating. Because that’s what it was. He was cheating. He’d cheated on Wendy with Kyle, and — oh, fuck, oh, fuck, oh, fuck. Craig had pictures. *He had proof.*

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Craig rolled his shoulders back. His posture was a casual slouch, but his eyes displayed that he was definitely entertained. “Interesting. Look, I’m not here to incriminate you. Honestly, I’m just here to offer you some shit to help you feel better.”

“Feel better?” Stan sputtered, dropping the collar of his shirt. He almost gasped when he was met with cold air. “*Feel better?*”

“Duh. Relationship issues can make people feel crappy. Trust me, I know. I’ve been there.” Craig shook his head, backtracking. “But I got something that’ll help take the edge off of that unhappy relationship. So, want some shit?”

Stan opened his mouth to say something, only to close it again. Then, he asked, “are you asking me if I want *drugs*?”

“Well, I’d appreciate it if you weren’t so *loud*, but. Yep. So. Deal?”

“No,” Stan snapped. “Fuck off.”

“Huh.” Craig tilted his head, looking at Stan with an impudent expression. “Wasn’t expecting that. Then again, I wasn’t expecting you to be gay. Though, Wendy is kinda butch. She’d be really hot as a guy, don’t you think? Maybe you’d be more attracted to her if she had a — ”

Stan lost control. Something in his brain misfired, maybe, or perhaps everything was just too much, and he’d been over-stressed. Maybe he over did it. Whatever it was, the result was the same. Stan clenched his fist and swung, aiming right for Craig’s face. He didn’t really know what he’d done until he felt a throbbing ache in his knuckles. The visual of Craig stumbling backwards, holding his face and hunched over with pain or shock — it processed later. And the visual of Craig looking at him, his eyes enraged, processed much too late. Stan wasn’t able to duck, or dodge, or block Craig’s return hit. His teeth clicked from impact, and he, too, stumbled backwards from it. There was a pain in his lip. Something warm dripped down his chin. He brought his hand up to wipe the blood from his face, and he felt a rush of adrenaline pump through his veins when he saw the bright red contrast with his skin. “You son of a bitch,” he hissed, and immediately lunged towards Craig.

Craig took the brunt of Stan’s weight with little issue, though he was caught between blocking his face and keeping Stan from tackling him to the ground. Eventually, their scrabbling was too much for the snow underneath their feet to agree with, and they were falling to the slushy, crystallized grass within a matter of seconds. Stan’s upper hand in the fight was quickly overridden when Craig slipped another punch to Stan’s face. Craig used the time Stan took to recover, however small of a time frame, to roll over Stan and pin him down to the ground with his hands gripping the collar of Stan’s shirt. Stan gasped for air against the pressure on his throat. To his surprise, Craig didn’t move to hit him again.

Stan reached up to grip Craig’s sleeves. He tried to tug Craig’s hands away from his shirt.

“Do not *fucking* hit me *ever* again, *Marsh*.”

Stan’s instinct was to spit in Craig’s face, but the adrenaline in his body was slowly cooling, and he was no longer mad enough to go off of instinct. Instead, he swallowed, almost

gagging at the taste of blood. His gaze was narrowed, glaring at Craig and trying to think his way out of where Craig had him pinned. The words weren't making sense to him. He was still in fight or flight mode.

At some point, a crowd of kids had gathered around to watch them fight. Some were screaming, others were shouting, rooting for either Craig or himself, but Stan was much too focused on the fight itself to deal with the other students. Things seemed to have settled, and Craig didn't look like he was about to strike him anymore, but he couldn't be sure. It didn't help that Craig wasn't exactly letting him up. Suddenly, Stan bucked upwards and rolled, pulling Craig's hands from his shirt and pinning him against the snow. It was freeing to be the one in control. Stan drew his arm back —

— and shouted when someone tugged him backwards off of Craig. His body automatically worked to struggle from the grip this person had on his arm, until he saw who it was.

“Kyle — ?” his voice cracked.

“Don't say my name. You've lost the right,” Kyle said, his tone full of contempt. He yanked Stan up from the ground, his grip now incredibly tight on Stan's arm. Without any further words, Kyle tugged Stan away.

Intermission II

Chapter Summary

Are you an idiot?

I used to ask myself that all the time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 22nd, 2013

Stan,

It feels like it's been a lot longer than just a week since I've written to you. I'd give you excuses about being too busy, or just plain distracted, but then I'd be lying. I might not seem like a very honest person at times, but I really do try to be truthful. Here's an example of that, I guess, because I've been avoiding writing to you. And before you blame yourself for that, no. It's not necessarily because of anything you did. Except it is. It's definitely because of what you did. Jesus fuck, man. I'm not even going to pretend it's my fault.

Well, it is my fault that I haven't written to you, because you're not in control of that, but that's beside the point.

I have a question for you, Stan. Are you an idiot?

I used to ask myself that all the time. *Is Stan Marsh an idiot?* And every single time, I came up with the indecisive answer of "I don't know." Because I didn't. And, maybe I still don't, in a way, but I think I understand it better, now.

There was a period of time where I was certain you were stupid. Maybe it was bias, because you were going down the stereotypical "jock" path, with your school-career consisting mostly of sports and accidentally-good grades. But — and here's the real kicker — I think I started wondering if you were an idiot *after* you'd abandoned sports. I think the concept of you changing so drastically in less than a month scared me. So, I responded in the only way I could: I explained it as you being an idiot. An idiot, idiot, idiot.

I know now that I had jumped onto a bandwagon way too quickly. I didn't think it through. I didn't think *you* through, and... I guess that kind of makes me the idiot, huh? I assumed you were ending up like your dad when you quit sports. I assumed you weren't going to try and be *better* than you already were, and the wasted potential got on my nerves. It's just not how my brain works. Maybe, I thought so lowly of you because I knew why you quit.

You're not as good at hiding things as you think, Stan. You're really, really not. Or maybe I'm just better at reading you than I thought. Because I know when something is wrong. You get that weird, contemplative look in your eyes. It's like you're there, but you're not *really* there. You're listening on the surface, but you don't really know what's going on around you. And it makes me curious, because I don't think like that. I've never been anywhere except the present (most of the time), and I want to know what goes on in your head. I want to know how you process things. I want to know how you *think*.

I know I'll never know you the way I know myself, and that scares me because I would trade absolutely anything to not be myself. I don't want to deal with anything that's going on. It's too much, Stan, it's too much, and I need help I need something I need a hug I don't know. I don't know what I need.

I don't know what I need.

But I think I know what you need, and I think that might be enough?

I have an answer to that question, by the way.

You're not an idiot. You're just not afraid.

I'll write to you again in a couple of days. Try to send me something back this time, okay? Anything is fine.

I love you, man.

Sincerely,
your super-best-friend Kyle.

Chapter End Notes

i'm working ahead! exciting :D i'm starting to get into the flow of things now, haha.
Chapter 16 will be posted tomorrow, October 2nd! :)

comments / feedback / constructive criticism ; all is welcome!

cheers!

Addiction of Conflict

Chapter Summary

His expression flashed apologetic, but he didn't say anything in the vein of an actual apology.

Kyle dragged Stan into the boy's bathroom with a vengeance. His expression was nothing short of irritated, and that in itself made sense. Stan's stinging face was enough to vouch for his own disbelief and irritation. He could, however, deal without the harsh tugging on his wrist.

The bathroom door clicked shut behind them, closing on its own. Somewhere in the flurry of everything going on, Kyle had shoved Stan towards the unit of sinks and glared at him in such a way that told him to *stay put*. Not wanting to make Kyle more angry than he already was, Stan stayed exactly where he had been shoved. His side ached, but it was nothing compared to the cut he now had in his lip. Curious, Stan reached up to wipe the side of his thumb against his lip. He drew in a steep breath when it came away with a hefty amount of blood. It wasn't horrible by any means — odds are, it wouldn't need stitches —, but even a small amount of blood could make him feel woozy. He couldn't stand things like that, especially now that the adrenaline had faded.

To distract himself from the wave of nausea, Stan watched Kyle as he stormed down the row of stalls, pushing on each door to check for any people who might be privy to eavesdropping. After he'd successfully peeked into the final stall, he stormed back towards the sinks in a flurry of orange. Hurriedly, Kyle tore off his gloves. He looked about ready to toss them on the floor, but he quickly thought better of it, and shoved them into his jacket pockets.

"What the hell were you *thinking*?" he hissed, making quick work of the zipper on his jacket. Stan watched as Kyle shed that, too. He opened his mouth to question Kyle as he saw him tie the sleeves around his waist. Since the jacket was bulky and stiff (definitely made purely for winter weather), it stuck out, overly distracting, from around Kyle. He didn't get the chance to say anything, however, as Kyle beat him to it. "Uh-uh. Don't even speak. I don't want to hear any of your dumb excuses for the *bullshit* that you just pulled, because nothing you can say will possibly convince me it was justified."

Stan closed his mouth.

"Now get on the counter," Kyle said. Stan tilted his head and gave Kyle a look, but when Kyle's glare only intensified, Stan decided to just do it. He glanced towards the sink, and then turned his back to it. He hopped up with very little issue, though he had to admit, it wasn't comfortable to sit on the edge of a sink. Even if it *was* mostly counter top.

Kyle muttered to himself angrily as he tugged paper towel after paper towel out of the dispenser. Stan was fairly sure he'd caught Kyle growl a quiet, "son of a bitch", followed quickly by, "stupid idiot". Then again, it totally could have been his imagination. Kyle turned on the tap, checking the temperature of the water with his wrist before soaking the bundle of paper towels. Once they were thoroughly drenched in water, Kyle tightened his grip on the bundle and squeezed, wringing out the water. And then, he handed the wet ball of towels to Stan. Unsure what to do with it, Stan just stared.

"Well? What are you waiting for?" Kyle asked, his tone still thoroughly expressing his agitation.

"What do you want me to do with that?" Stan asked, giving the wet ball a weird look.

"What — " Kyle stumbled over the word. His face was so red, it was almost unnatural. He grabbed the hand Stan was using to hold the paper towel and pushed it towards the bleeding crack in his lip. "*Stop your lip from bleeding.*"

Stan made a small, uncomfortable grunt when the towel touched his split lip. He winced from the pain, his eyes reflexively shutting for a moment. He tore away from Kyle's hand, mumbling something about being fine to do it on his own, though it was muddled even to himself. The point came across nonetheless, and Kyle withdrew, pressing his lips together so tight, they paled. His expression flashed apologetic, but he didn't say anything in the vein of an actual apology. Instead, he turned back to the paper towel dispenser. He grabbed a couple more towels. He repeated the process he'd done with the first few, though this time, he folded them into a neat square. He pressed it between the palms of his hands, and then shook it over the drain. Drops of water fell down his palms, and a few strayed down his wrists.

At that point, Stan stopped paying attention. He was more concerned with the pain in his lip. He was tempted to pull the towel away and look at just how much blood there was, but he didn't feel capable of stomaching that. He was equally as tempted to look at the damage in the mirror, but... there was absolutely *no way* he'd be able to stomach *that*. He knew it couldn't be horrible, but it definitely hurt like a bitch. A piece of his brain told him that, if it hurts that much, it can't be good —

Stan jumped, though it was mostly from surprise rather than pain. Somewhere down the line, Kyle had moved in front of him and lifted his hand to press the paper towel against the bruise forming on his cheek. This towel was cold, contrary to the warm one pressing on his lip. It was a strange dichotomy, but it was oddly pleasant. His reaction was nonetheless contrary to that feeling, however, and Kyle reacted in kind by pulling away, just a centimeter.

"Sorry — does that hurt?" Kyle asked. His voice was calm, and acutely concerned. It was contrary to his previous anger, and was slightly surprising.

"The cold is nice, but... yeah," Stan said, his voice muffled by the paper towel. "It hurts."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have punched a guy," Kyle quipped. His harsh tone was back, but the way he pressed the towel to Stan's cheek was gentle. It made Stan's gut twist. His nausea came back, stronger than before, but its basis was different — it was sentimental. Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to make Kyle happy.

“I’m sorry,” Stan replied.

Kyle’s brows furrowed, their eyes meeting for a moment. Just a moment. A moment that would never last long enough. Stan watched Kyle’s jaw tighten as he swallowed. *No*, he thought, distressed when Kyle looked away from him. *Look at me*. “I’m not the one you should be apologizing to,” Kyle said, gingerly adjusting the cold towel on Stan’s cheek. The childish wish for intimacy was forced into the background. Stan did his best to focus on the throbbing ache in his cheek and lip. His hands shook just a bit as he pressed the paper towels tighter to his mouth. It stung, and he almost winced again. He averted his gaze from Kyle, choosing instead to focus on an odd discoloration of the wall opposite himself.

Everything was winding down, and with the winding down, came the feeling of everything becoming increasingly more foreign. His body no longer felt like his own, which was strange to him. He’d felt most alive when he was in the midst of the fight. He remembered now why he enjoyed sports. It was the rush. The adrenaline that came from the game was absolutely invigorating. The gamble of winning or losing, the fact that everything was technically by chance, the idea of it all being spontaneous — it made him feel real. It made his whole essence thrive. It felt good. He felt good. Maybe it was fucked up, sitting on one of the sinks in the boys’ bathroom and reveling in the afterglow of something so real. Maybe, more than anything, it was fucked up that he wanted it again. He wanted to fuck someone up, and get fucked up, and stop sitting on his ass and go *do* something with his life, because — maybe, just maybe — this wasn’t all there was supposed to be.

Stan entertained the idea that he had made a mistake in quitting the football team. He was kicking himself over not fighting for his spot, for rolling over like a dog in the sun and taking on the philosophy of “go with the flow”... if that was even a philosophy. Was that a philosophy? He didn’t know. He’d never used that word to describe something before. Not in recent memory, at least. Holy shit.

Or, maybe, he’d just taken one too many hits to the head.

“Are you okay?” asked Kyle. Stan startled from his focus on the wall. He blinked a few times to get his eyes to right themselves. When Stan didn’t respond, Kyle added, “you’re shaking.”

Stan glanced down, and sure enough, Kyle was right. His entire body felt like it was vibrating. He felt almost electric, like he was on the verge of getting shocked by his own nervous system. He wasn’t quite sure why he was shaking, or vibrating. He also wasn’t quite sure when he’d stopped holding pressure to his lip, but he had. He was squeezing the reddened bundle of paper towels in his hand, which was now resting in his lap. Drops of water were seeping into the fabric of his jeans. He was on fire. “I — ” his voice caught in his chest. He cleared his throat. “I’m fine. Really. I’m just — it’s... thrill of the fight.”

If he hadn’t known better, Stan would have thought Kyle cracked a little smile. “I’m pretty sure the expression is ‘thrill of the chase.’”

“Well, yeah, okay.” Stan picked at the paper towels in his hands, subconsciously leaning into the cold bundle Kyle was still holding steadily against his cheek. “But I wasn’t chasing anyone, so it’d be kind of shitty without the editing.”

Kyle didn't say anything to that. Instead, he gently pulled the cold towel away from Stan's face. Stan was disappointed at the development of this action, but he didn't protest in fear of pissing Kyle off again. He settled for watching Kyle, who had wandered over to the trash can and was tossing the folded paper towels into it. Kyle dried his hands off on his pants. He stood there, staring at the trash can, for a long time. Long enough for Stan to realize his lip was no longer dripping blood. Long enough for the throbbing in his face to taper into a soft knocking against his nerves. Kyle turned to face Stan again. His eyes were softened, pitiful and sympathetic. Something deeper, and so much more profound, was trying to scratch its way through them onto the surface, but Kyle was a master at compartmentalizing. Personal emotions and social experiences were two different boxes on a shelf that was much too big, and much too full, for a teenager.

"I want you to apologize to Craig," Kyle said as he hopped onto the counter next to Stan. Instinctively, Stan scoffed, which Kyle didn't find humorous. His eyes narrowed just a tinge as he stated, "I'm serious."

"I know you're serious," Stan said. "It's just that —"

But Stan cut off. What was he planning on saying? "*You wouldn't want to apologize either, if you knew what that freakazoid had on his phone*"? Yeah, because *that* conversation would end well. Stan had put the two of them into an awful spot as it was. The last thing he wanted to do was add to the stress he was causing. What Kyle didn't know couldn't hurt him. Stan already had plenty of secrets. Surely, one more wouldn't do any harm.

Kyle made a face at Stan's lack of a response. He knocked his knuckles against Stan's knee, and when that didn't prompt an answer, he bumped his shoulder against Stan's.

"Don't just stop in the middle of sentences, man. That's really lame."

"Sorry," Stan apologized. "I just... y'know. He... deserved it?"

Kyle's eye twitched. Aw shit.

"I — I mean..."

But it was too late. Kyle had already punched Stan — albeit lightly — in the side, his mouth tensed and forehead creased. "Deserved it?" Kyle snapped. "Bullshit. 'He deserved it,' my ass. I'd be hard-pressed to believe he did anything worse than breathe on you wrong. You've been touchy and emotional as all hell, dude, and it's not cool."

"*I've been touchy and emotional?*" sputtered Stan. "Sorry, but have you looked in a mirror lately? You're pretty much the definition of moody. The only reason you're seeing *me* as touchy and emotional is because *you are projecting*."

"Oh, don't even start!" Kyle tossed his hands up into the air and slid himself off the counter. "I'm fucking sick of you blaming everyone else other than yourself for all your stupid baggage. It gets exhausting to deal with after a while, you know that? People don't want to be around downers all the time, Stan. That's why you haven't made any new fucking *friends*."

The sudden outburst hit a nerve in Stan that he didn't even know he had. Kyle had cut a cord that was connecting Stan to all of the confidence he'd had. He could physically feel his emotions crumbling. It was weird how just a few seconds could totally fuck someone up like that. Strangely enough, the shattering feeling appeared to be mutual.

Stan, while hurt by his friend's words, couldn't help but empathize with the panic that cast a shadow over Kyle's expression. Kyle's eyes went wide, darting this way and that in an attempt at regaining control of the situation. The air was suddenly filled with "*I didn't mean to*"s and "*I'm so sorry*"s and "*I didn't say that*"s. It stayed like that, Kyle babbling apologies, until he clapped a hand over his mouth to shut himself up. Stan found it curious how Kyle was more outwardly, openly effected by those words than he was. Kyle's face had darkened in a flush of color, and his voice was muffled as he buried his face into his hands. It felt like hours had passed in the space the two of them took up. This little pocket that they had created, where they were bickering and tense, rather than in class, like they should be.

"Kyle," Stan tried, but his voice was weak compared to the volume of Kyle's breathing. "Kyle, I get it. It's true. It's okay, really —"

"No!" Kyle exclaimed. He finally pulled his hands away from his face. He stared into Stan's eyes, his emotions vividly on display in such a way that made them impossible to decipher. "No, it's not. It's not okay. Nothing is okay. If there was ever a time in which everything was absolutely not okay, now would be that time."

It was scary. Kyle looked like he was truly breaking down. The thinness of his arms, the dark circles under his eyes, the obvious panic and anxiety — "Kyle, what's going on?" Stan asked, wary.

"Nothing," Kyle said. His tone held with it a wheeze. He scrabbled and fidgeted with the fabric of his jacket with clumsy fingers. "Nothing is going on, and that's the fucking — that's the fucking *problem*. Fucking *dammit*."

"I don't understand. How can nothing be the problem?"

"I'm — scared." Kyle's voice cracked, and with it, so did the tension and stress in his shoulders. He slumped, his expression relaxing. "I'm scared of — of growing up. It feels like I'm losing everything. It feels... like the world is spinning too fast, and everyone else is able to keep up, and I can't. I don't get it. And I don't like it."

Stan frowned. Something, somewhere, deep down in the depths of his chest, pulled him closer to Kyle. He hopped off of the sink. Quietly, and slowly, he approached Kyle, his head tucked down to try and help Kyle feel a little more at ease, and a little more in-control. He knew it was a risk, but it was one he was definitely willing to take. Stan opened his arms. It was just a little bit at first, but when Kyle just stared at him, he gestured towards himself with both hands. Kyle seemed to have caught the message, and slowly allowed himself to ease closer to Stan. Before Kyle could think twice about it, Stan enveloped him in a hug. Not one of those fake, awkward, goodbye friend-hugs, though — no. It was a real, full-body hug.

Kyle responded in kind. He wrapped his arms almost frantically around Stan's neck and held on tight, like he was seconds away from falling off a cliff and Stan was his only hope for

safety. The idea was almost frightening, but Stan made sure to hold on tight. He kept his arms firmly around Kyle's torso, closing his eyes and letting himself feel the warmth of Kyle's hat against his cheek. It stung the bruise that had developed, but he didn't care. He really didn't care.

"It's gonna be okay," Stan whispered. "It's gonna be okay."

And although Kyle's breaths came out in heavy, quivering intervals, Stan could feel in his gut that Kyle understood.

They stayed like that, holding onto each other, for a long time. Stan started to rub Kyle's back, and Kyle's lungs heaved a sigh. Kyle combed his fingers through Stan's hair, and Stan let him. It was maybe ten minutes until first period ended, that Kyle finally relaxed and pulled away enough to press his forehead against Stan's chest rather than having it buried against Stan's neck.

"Hey, Stan?" Kyle finally piped up.

"Yeah?" Stan replied.

"Could we..." something in Kyle's grip loosened, and Stan allowed him to pull away just a few inches. "D'you think, maybe, we could get high again? Just — one last time."

Stan inhaled sharply. On instinct, he answered with a quick, "no."

Kyle's face fell. "What? But — we've done it plenty of times before. Just one more time wouldn't kill us."

"I don't think you understand what you become when you get high," Stan said. Guilt trickled in through every crack of his being. Flashes of Kyle's dresser passed through his visual memory. He closed his eyes, just for a moment, to get away from them. "I don't like seeing that side of you, and I especially don't like knowing I'm the one who created it."

"C'mon." Kyle's tone was edging on something different, and something unsettling crossed his expression; Stan had never seen that before. "Once. Please. Just one more time. That's all I need."

Stan withdrew the rest of the way from the hug. He took a cautious step backwards, and gave Kyle a confused look. "Look, man. I know it's fun to get high, and shit, but that doesn't mean it's a good thing to do. Remember Towelie?"

"Of course I remember Towelie — " Kyle's jaw tightened. "That — I'm not *turning into Towelie*, Stan. I'm not an addict."

"I know, but — " Stan swallowed down the unsaid, *the way you looked at me was fucking scary*. "But that doesn't mean you won't get addicted. Look, if you want to take the stupid risk and get high on your own, go for it. But I'm not supplying you with anything, and I'm not gonna do it with you. I'm quitting that shit."

Kyle opened his mouth to reply, but he didn't manage to get any words out before the bell rang for the end of first period. Immediately, Kyle's muscles tensed back up. He looked around the bathroom almost frantically, as if he were looking for a clock.

"No way," he said. His face paled. "I didn't just miss AP lit. Tell me I didn't just miss AP lit."

"You didn't just miss AP lit."

"Fuck. Oh, fuck." Kyle's shoes squeaked a single, high-pitched note as he spun on his heel. He yanked his backpack up from the floor. "I'm so fucking screwed. This is bad. Look — you need to... we need to get to our second period classes, we definitely can't hang around in here any —"

A distracting, musical beep echoed through the school via the intercom, signaling an announcement. Both boys halted as the voice over the intercom crackled its message.

"Stan Marsh, please report to the principal's office. Stan Marsh to the principal's office."

And all Stan could think of to do in that moment was utter a quiet, "uh-oh."

In Context of Space

Chapter Summary

“You’re dumb,” he finally said, and that was that.

Craig was already sitting outside the principal’s office by the time Stan had arrived. While it wasn’t particularly hard to believe, it also wasn’t what Stan had been expecting. Needless to say, he was startled, and he was very close to spinning around right there and progressing with his day like nothing had happened. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t have the backbone to ignore school authority. Not today.

Ruefully, Stan approached the row of chairs. He sat himself down in the one furthest from Craig, and did his best to ignore the guy. Although he was really trying to appear cool and nonchalant, Stan was automatically on the defense. His arms were crossed tightly over his chest. The most honest thing he could say right then would be, “I wanna be anywhere but here”. Fortunately for him (or unfortunately, really), his feelings about the current situation, and where he sat in general, were displayed openly for the entire world to see — even if the “entire world” in this context was just the school hallway.

From the few wayward glances Stan had taken, he noticed that Craig was pulling off the “I don’t give a fuck” posture really well. His arms were crossed, too, but he was significantly more casual about it. Not to mention, he wasn’t hunched in on himself. He was leaned back in the chair, the back of his head resting against the wall, and his legs spread wide. Craig was taking up as much space as he possibly could, without it seeming over-the-top. His presence oozed confidence and dominance. Stan was sure that, if someone were to ask him, Craig would describe himself as the Top Dog.

There were very few things that appeared out of place on Craig’s persona. There was a distinctive red stain just under his nose, which was extremely telling of where Stan must have gotten him. It was almost shocking, really, seeing the remnants of blood surrounding the nose of someone he’d hit. He couldn’t remember where he’d tried to aim at Craig, but one of those hits must have found home close enough to cause a decent nosebleed. After a couple more glances towards Craig, Stan was able to confirm that he definitely didn’t break his nose. He hadn’t thought he had, but he couldn’t be too sure. Not without getting a closer look, at least. This was about as close as he could get, while still being discrete.

Nothing happened for a long time. No office officials came out to get either of them, and every other student or faculty member was in a classroom somewhere in the building. Anxiously, Stan wondered if he’d be stuck there all day. He hoped not. He had a project to turn in for final period, and he wasn’t prepared to fall behind. He also didn’t want to miss lunch. It was Salisbury steak day, and while the Salisbury steak in high school tasted like wet cardboard at best, it reminded him of the way things used to be, before they got complicated.

Reminiscing on the Good Ol' Days was a good way to give him a bittersweet feeling. It was a pretty decent bittersweet feeling, though. It was one such feeling that he wouldn't mind drowning in, if at all possible. It wasn't a horrible way to go out.

Jesus. How long were they going to have to sit here?

Stan looked at Craig, then, only to see the guy hadn't moved an inch since he'd last glanced over. His eyes were closed, too. Distantly, Stan wondered if Craig was asleep. Or dead. Maybe he'd died. Stan felt pretty dead, so he wouldn't put it past him.

Finally, Stan couldn't take it anymore. The silence was too much to bear. He cracked.

"I'm sorry," Stan blurted. He looked away when he saw Craig open his eyes and lift his head. The bit of his expression that Stan had caught was utterly blank. It was eerie. When Craig didn't say anything, he began to bounce his leg. And then, he began to speak again. "For punching you, I mean. Y'know. In the face."

"It's fine. Unlike you, I'm not vain. A little bruise or two isn't going to ruin my life."

Stan sputtered a noise of disbelief, turning his head to look at Craig properly. His nonchalant air hadn't faded in the slightest. God damn, was this guy for real?

"Besides." Craig rolled his shoulders back, and he stretched his legs out further into the hallway. Although it bothered Stan a little bit in principle, there was no real reason he couldn't take up that much space. They were the only people here, anyway. "I'd be pretty damn pissed if I were a cheater, too."

Craig looked at Stan almost expectantly. Then, he raised a brow.

"Woow," he droned. "The vanity remark gets to you, but the jab at your fidelity doesn't? You've got some messed up morals."

Stan scoffed. "Yeah. *I* have messed up morals. Do you know how ridiculous that is, coming from the sixteen-year-old drug dealer?"

"Seventeen, actually. We're the same age."

"Are we now? Could've fooled me."

Craig gave him a sideways glance, unmoving. "You're dumb," he finally said, and that was that. The retort Craig went with was so childish it was almost funny, though Stan knew better than to laugh. His lungs were still on the verge of protesting, anyway.

Out of the corner of his eye, Stan saw that there were not one, but two bags sitting next to Craig on the floor. The black messenger bag was seated next to Craig's left foot. The other bag was on Craig's other side, and Stan actually had to squint to see it clearly. The waving grays and single, obnoxious red tone was blazingly familiar.

He was almost shocked when he realized, with almost utmost certainty, that the backpack was his own. *Shit*, he thought, staring intently at the backpack. *Did I leave it outside?*

He reached for his backpack — slowly, at first. When he gathered the nerves to retrieve his bag, he tugged it away from Craig’s right foot.

Erm. Tried.

The bag didn’t budge.

Stan was pretty thoroughly embarrassed at that point, especially when he realized Craig was giving him this weird, cold, dead-eyed stare. It wasn’t actually all that different from the other stares Craig had been giving him, but in this context, it felt creepier. Overall, Stan tried to ignore it. He tightened his grip on the backpack’s handle, and tugged a little harder. He almost cussed under his breath when it still wasn’t moving.

“Jesus Christ,” Stan said, his eyes meeting Craig’s. “What, did you super glue this thing?”

“No,” Craig replied simply. “You’re just dumb.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. We already established that. Can I have my backpack now?”

“No,” repeated Craig.

“*Seriously?*” A fire was beginning to kindle in Stan’s shoulders, something abstract and uncomfortable. “How are you even keeping it in place? *You’re not touching it.*”

Craig sniffed dryly, wiping his nose with the back of his sleeve. “I’m not telling you.”

“Dick,” Stan muttered.

Craig didn’t reply. He just sat there, staring straight ahead. Stan began to feel the discomfort growing. He didn’t like being separated from his backpack. There was something comforting about the familiar weight of carrying way too many fucking pounds of books. Something clicked.

“I got a biology textbook in there,” Stan blurted, “and I’m not afraid to use it.”

“Are you actually threatening me?” Craig asked.

“Are you actually holding my backpack hostage?” Stan quipped. “What do you even want it for, anyway? What ransom do I need to pay you to get my stuff back?”

“If you could buy some shit from me, that’d make me sooo happy,” answered Craig.

Stan wrinkled his nose in disgust. “What the hell is *up* with you?” he spat, slumping back in his chair. He adopted a similar position to Craig, although he was more slouched. “I don’t want your stupid drugs, man. I’m not into that.”

Craig’s eyes gained a scintillating look. Stan noticed the reflections in them almost *too* sharply, especially since Craig was looking him up and down. Stan felt self-conscious, overly

aware of his own skin. Seriously, this kid was fucking weird. “That’s bullshit, Marsh, and you know it,” Craig stated, matter-of-fact.

“What is?”

The muscles in Craig’s jaw tensed. “A little birdie told me that you dabble in the devil’s lettuce, and you’re a junkie.”

“*Excuse* me? Who told you that?”

“Me. I did. I have a part-time job as a birdie. It’s really time consuming.”

Stan couldn’t help but give Craig a weird look. He wasn’t in a joking mood, and he’d never really found the humor in Craig’s quips. The fact that he came off as almost strangely creepy, especially as he got older and more willowy, didn’t help with the strain in Stan’s sense of humor.

Overall, Stan decided to give up on it for now. He’d really rather not push it, especially of Craig was being serious about wanting a drug deal as payment for something that didn’t even *belong* to Craig.

A few minutes passed, in which Stan tumbled the prospect of being called to the principal’s office around in his head. He didn’t know what was taking so long; this wait must have been fifteen minutes, at least. He was growing impatient, and boredom was starting to seep into him through his skin. It was like that sweater he’d bought last year. He forgot to wash it, so the dyes ended up turning his nails and skin a weird purple color. Actually, it had kept transferring dyes even *after* he’d washed it. He didn’t wear it for more than a few months, though, so the consequences didn’t last too long.

Stan glanced up when he heard hurried footsteps begin to trail down the hallway towards them. It was a rhythmic click. The simplistic tapping of flats against the floor was something belonging only to a girl — and the rhythm was familiar. Stan was unsurprised when Wendy ended up coming into focus. She held the hall pass in her hand, and her face was contorted in anger.

She came to a flustered stop right in front of Stan, who could do little more than stare like an idiot at his girlfriend. He expected her to say something — anything, really —, but she didn’t. Wendy just glared at him, her hands on her hips, and the lanyard of the hall pass wrapped around her wrist. Nervous, Stan cleared his throat. “Um,” he began, momentarily averting his gaze. “Hi, Wendy — ”

“Don’t ‘*Hi, Wendy*’ me, Stan,” she said, her ponytail shifting as she tilted her head. “Kyle told me what — ”

She cut off, very suddenly, and in that suddenness, her face softened. The anger melted into concern.

“ — *happened* to your *face*?” she sputtered. She dropped her hands from her hips, and took a step closer to Stan. She bent over so their eyes were level, and she gingerly swiped her thumb

over Stan's cheek. Stan drew in a sharp breath when the pad of her finger bumped the still tender bruise. She withdrew her touch from his face quickly. "I'm sorry. My *God*, Stan. What happened?"

Stan opened his mouth to respond, but found his larynx to be paralyzed. A pounding began to start, deep and thrumming in his face. The blood flow towards his cheeks caused by his embarrassment made all of his injuries hurt a whole hell of a lot worse.

Craig must have been bored, because he came to Stan's rescue.

"Note to self," he noted monotonously, his eyes closed. "Don't badmouth Wendy in front of her feral boyfriend."

The statement would have been much more effective if Craig had come away with worse injuries, but the same idea was there nonetheless. Even so, Wendy portrayed shock. "Stan, this happened because he *badmouthed* me?"

Stan had to think back to the fight itself to remember exactly what had caused him to physically retaliate. Although it hadn't really felt like he'd been doing it to purposefully protect Wendy's name, it certainly did come off that way unconsciously. He scratched the back of his neck, tipping his head downward. "I... yeah?"

He'd admit, he kind of expected a flattered reaction. Something along the lines of "oh my goodness, Stan, that's so sweet" or whatever, but he didn't. He didn't get that at all. The first thing he received from Wendy was silence. His anxiety and embarrassment about this whole thing only stood to grow in the midst of her returning glare. "Stanley," Wendy said, and it took every ounce of energy Stan had for him not to flinch at the use of his full name. "I don't need you to protect me."

Although it wasn't nearly as bad of a scold as he was expecting, it still stung. He wasn't sure why it hurt his pride — or, maybe it was just his instinctual reaction —, but it did. "I'm sorry," he apologized. Wendy didn't reply to that. Instead, she turned her attention towards Craig, who was still sitting there, not reacting, looking like a douche.

"Craig," she said sharply. Craig looked at her through half-lidded eyes. "You can give it back to him now."

Craig's movements were a few seconds delayed. He dawdled in completing the action Wendy had apparently instructed, and it showed in his languidness. "Whatever you say, boss," he said. He stood, nudging his messenger bag away from the chair he'd been sitting in. He then proceeded to lift up the chair, disentangle the strap of Stan's backpack from around one of the chair's legs, and kick it haphazardly in Stan's general direction. Without further ado, he set the chair back down and plopped himself onto the seat. He went back to his alpha position, his arms crossed solidly over his chest, and tipped the front of his chullo hat over his eyes.

Confused, Stan turned to look at Wendy. She leaned down, picked up Stan's backpack, and settled it against his chair.

“You — ” he stumbled over the words, unsure of how to put the pieces together. “You planned — ?”

“I didn’t plan anything.” Wendy heaved a heavy sigh. “Kyle told me about what happened. When I went out front to find you, I found your backpack instead. I brought it here, gave it to Craig, and told him not to give it to you until I came back.”

“Why?” Stan asked.

“I wanted to make sure you wouldn’t leave before I got a chance to talk to you,” she replied. “And, since I knew you wouldn’t go anywhere without your backpack...”

“I obviously didn’t leave,” Stan said. “I was called to the principal’s office. The only place I’d logically be was here.”

“I wasn’t thinking logically, Stan.” Wendy reached up to comb her fingers through her ponytail. The plastic of the hall pass clicked against her watch, and her expression was nothing if not mildly overwhelmed. “I was just told that my boyfriend got beat up by an apathetic drug dealer — no offense, Craig.”

“Some taken, yeah,” Craig answered.

“Whatever. My point is, thinking logically wasn’t my top priority. Think about it. He’s had fighting experience. You *haven’t*.”

Stan began to fidget with the edges of his sweater, curling the fabric across his knuckles and picking at loose strings with his nails. “I was on the football team. I’m not totally helpless.” It was a shit defense on his part, but it was the only thing he had.

“I’m not saying you’re totally helpless. I’ve never said that. But you’re not on the football team anymore. You haven’t been on for over a year.” Wendy pressed her lips into a tight line, causing them to pale. “Don’t you remember why they kicked you off?”

“Of course I remember why they kicked me off,” scoffed Stan.

“Well, then, excuse me if I’m not entirely happy with the idea of you getting into fights!” Her argument reached a crescendo, and her cheeks were beginning to redden from just how worked up she was getting. “*Especially* with Craig. The last thing you need is more connections with that sort of stuff.”

“I thought you hated me being on the team.”

“I didn’t hate it. I never hated it. I was just — ” Wendy cut off again. When she started talking, she did so slowly. “I was just worried about you. You see all those people in the news, and you read those studies about people getting concussions and brain damage from football. I just didn’t want that to happen to you.”

“It wouldn’t happen to me,” Stan said. “It didn’t happen to me.”

“I didn’t know that.” Her eyes were wide, now, and she blinked like she was trying to rid herself of an emotional response. Stan felt stiff as he watched his girlfriend try not to cry in front of him. He hoped her attempt at hiding her emotions was because they weren’t alone, and not because she didn’t feel safe around him. Just the thought of her feeling like she couldn’t trust him was heartbreaking. “Have you ever looked at the symptoms of CTE?”

Stan didn’t reply. His silence spurred her on.

“Impulsiveness,” she began. “Depression, substance abuse, suicidal thoughts — ”

“Stop,” he hissed, giving a wary glance towards Craig. Although he wasn’t reacting, he could tell he was listening. He felt thankful when Wendy’s voice tapered off, fading into the background noise of the hallway. The only thing to be heard, just for the moment of quiet, was the sound of an old air conditioning unit whirring. “I don’t have brain damage or whatever, okay? And I don’t have substance abuse issues. *And* I’m not impulsive.”

“Punching a guy seemed pretty impulsive!” she hissed back. She removed the hall pass from her wrist, untangling the lanyard and lacing it through her fingers. Her head was down-turned. Stan could tell she was upset. He didn’t want her to be upset. He was guilt-ridden, and he reacted based on what felt right.

Slowly, Stan stood up from the chair. He wrapped Wendy up in a hug. Although she didn’t hug him back, she did lean into it. She pressed her face into his shoulder. They stood like that just for a few seconds, but it felt like forever. It was one of those good forevers. It was the kind of forever that Stan wanted to be a forever. But then the forever ended, and Stan was left reeling at all the reasons why that forever wasn’t meant to be.

When Wendy pulled away, she raised herself up onto her tip-toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Thankfully, she chose the one without the bruise. “I’ll see you after school, okay?” she said. She looked at him hopefully.

“Yeah,” he responded. “See you after school.”

Wendy smiled at him before walking away. Her anger had disappeared completely through the course of their conversation. For that, Stan was thankful. The only thing he felt worried about was the concern that she’d expressed over him. The way they ended that conversation hadn’t felt natural, and he was afraid that she’d start it back up once school ended, and they were alone. Exhausted, Stan fell back into his seat. He tugged his backpack closer to himself, hooking his wrist through the handle and letting himself simply feel the rough texture of it. He could get lost in it. In fact, he would go so far as to say that he wanted to get lost in it. He wanted to get away from everything. He wanted to disappear, just for a little while, just long enough for him to feel relieved of the daily stress. He tried not to think about the conversation with Wendy, or the conversation with Kyle, or the conversation with Craig. He tried to forget the sound of his parents screaming at each other, and he tried to forget that his dad wasn’t living in their house anymore.

He felt estranged in his own life, like he was watching it go by. He hated the idea that he wasn’t in control of anything. Stan just wanted to crawl under his covers in bed, and forget the universe, and forget the world, and forget Colorado, and everything in it.

“She really doesn’t know, does she?” Craig asked, and Stan looked at him with an absent expression. Craig’s own face, while not overtly emotional in any sense of the word, was displaying some sort of tempered shock. He’d lifted his hat from his eyes, and was looking at Stan. There was a weird thing buried in the way he was reacting to this. Instead of denying the fact that there was anything for her to not know, Stan just shrugged.

“Of course not,” he muttered.

“...dude,” said Craig. Just that one word, said so plainly, was enough to bring Stan down. He wanted Craig to shut up. Just shut up, that’s all he wanted. His entire body protested the idea of interaction with anyone. But, of course, Craig didn’t let up. “That’s fucked.”

Stan was bitter. “Like you’re one to talk.”

Stan expected Craig to retaliate to that. He expected some sort of defense. He expected an argument. Unsurprisingly, he got none of what he was expecting. Instead, Craig just huffed in amusement. There was the twitch of a smirk on his lips, and something about it looked off. All Craig said was, “you’re right.”

The door to the principal’s office opened, and out stepped the secretary. She looked between the two boys, though she didn’t react to either of their looks, or anything else about them. “Craig Tucker,” she said. He acknowledged her with an infinitesimal sideways tip of his head. It seemed he’d been in this exact position before; maybe not even just once. He was overly comfortable with this situation, and it made Stan feeling insecure.

Craig stood up, relinquishing his claim on the space he’d overtaken. He picked up his bag — and then tossed it towards Stan. Stan, although not expecting it, caught the bag with ease. He gave Craig a confused look, quirked a brow. That same comfortable smirk tugged at the muscles in Craig’s cheeks, though he did nothing to show it. “Hand it over to Tweek when he comes by,” he said.

Stan began to protest, but by the time he’d managed to form any words, Craig had already disappeared into the principal’s office.

Stan sighed, and dropped the bag down on the floor next to his own. He found it to be a bitter sort of irony, being stuck here with Craig’s bag. However unsavory the situation, though, he tried not to dwell on it.

Successfully, Stan faded into the background. He closed his eyes, and tipped his head backwards against the wall, and pretended the world didn’t exist. In the comfort of his sweatshirt, he drifted. He forgot about the universe, he forgot about the world. He forgot about Colorado, and everything in it. No matter how hard he tried, though, he couldn’t manage to feel completely at peace. There was this deeply-rooted exhaustion in the center of his existence that made him feel like no amount of relaxation would ever let him feel at ease.

Even so, the drifting was nice. He was okay with pretending, and he was okay with the nothing.

Stan wondered if Craig ever felt like this. He wondered if Craig's nonchalance and aloof personality was just the hard, outer shell of something a lot more raw and peaceful. The idea of humanizing someone that he tried so hard to dislike was unfavorable, though. Little by little, as he allowed himself to drift longer and longer, he managed to push it away.

The world was peace, he told himself. The world was fine. Everything's okay. Everything is okay.

For a few seconds, that was enough.

The Lovely Fraud

Chapter Summary

That struck Stan as strange.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Not a few moments later, the bell for the end of second period rang. The clamor of footsteps broke Stan out of his calm, borderline meditative state. He mourned the loss of that semblance of peace, though he did so quickly and without much lingering feeling. He opened his eyes, and was startled at the overwhelming brightness that surrounded him in the hallway. Those fluorescent lights had never been so offensive.

He sat up straighter in his chair, suddenly much too aware of just how much space he was taking up. He didn't know when, nor did he know exactly how, but he'd managed to slide down a bit in the uncomfortable plastic chair. He pondered the odd feeling, and came to the surprising conclusion that he'd actually managed to fall asleep in the chair. It explained the groggy feeling, and his eyes' sensitivity to the lights. His mouth was dry, too, the same way it was whenever he woke up.

Stan rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes, settling into his usual slouch. He really hoped it'd only been a few minutes. It was embarrassing enough to have fallen asleep at school, but to have fallen asleep at school and possibly missed the secretary calling him in —

No, he told himself. He didn't miss the secretary — or anyone, for that matter — calling him in. If the secretary had wanted him, she'd have come out, seen that he was asleep, and tapped him awake. That's what adults did when students were sleeping in class; why should hallways be any different?

With a grunt, Stan rolled his shoulders back. His chest felt regular again, and he was satisfied with the fact that he'd yet to feel any rough emotions soak into him from the center of his brain. He floated in that feeling of being okay, and he let himself slowly settle into wakefulness, because he knew it wouldn't last. It never did.

He tucked his feet under the chair when students began hurrying down the same hallway he was sitting in. Without realizing it, he glanced to the side to check that Craig's bag was still where he'd ended up leaving it. Sure enough, it was. He checked for his own backpack, as well, and breathed a sigh of relief when he found it to be in the same place.

Now thoroughly recovered from his sleepy haze, Stan reached over to pick up Craig's bag. He'd seen it a few times. It was always hanging off of Craig's shoulder when they passed each other in the hallway. While Stan had taken the time to glance over the designs and such

that adorned the flap, he'd never actually thoroughly examined exactly what the designs meant. And, now that he was stuck outside the principal's office with little else to do, why not examine the designs?

The new proximity he now had with the bag gave Stan insight into the markings. All in all, it was kind of cool. Sure, it was pretty flowery and kind of gay (what with the *literal flowers* adorning the bottom left corner), but Stan could honestly appreciate the silver and gold Sharpie designs. As much as he loved the idea of Craig doodling all of this shit up in the middle of social studies, or something, Stan knew better. He'd seen Craig's drawings, and these were very obviously not done by his hand. Upon further inspection, Stan noticed that there were little quotes and words and sentences spattered here and there. Next to one of the clips that kept the flap of the bag closed, was a guinea pig with a space helmet, and just over that illustration (which was impressively realistic) was a crudely written "ASTRO-STRIPE THE ASTRIPENAUT". Stan almost snorted at the crappy pun.

Closer to the top was a much more cartoonish doodle of — what Stan could only *assume* to be — Craig. Under that one, the phrase "Space-man Craig" had been scribbled on. Bits and pieces of French littered the places that weren't taken up by the massive design. "*Je t'aime*" was the only one Stan knew. Others, such as "*tu as mon coeur*" and "*je n'aime pas les autres garçons; je t'aime seulement*", he couldn't even begin to comprehend. He wasn't taking French. But Kyle was.

Before he could use the opportunity to ask Kyle for a translation, someone came to a stop beside him. He glanced up from the bag to see who had stopped, and his cheeks began to heat up with embarrassment when he noticed that it was Tweek. Was this intrusive? Was it weird that he'd been studying Craig's bag so closely? *Almost definitely*, part of his mind confirmed, but the other part of his mind dismissed that as false. *He probably wouldn't care if I looked through the entire fucking thing. He's shameless.*

"What are you doing with Craig's bag?" Tweek asked. He was pulling restlessly on the hem of his shirt. Stan almost raised his brows in surprise at just how harshly Tweek was biting into his bottom lip, too. Keyword: almost. Tweek was known for being a spaz, and the fact that he was practically shivering like an angry chihuahua wasn't weird in the slightest. Stan must have taken too long to respond, because Tweek made a subtle yelping noise, like he'd tried to hold it in, before repeating, "what are you doing with Craig's bag?"

"He told me to hang onto it," Stan replied. "And he told me to give it to you when you came by, so..."

Stan held the bag out for him to take. Immediately, Tweek snatched it up, holding it close to his chest. The entire front design was being protectively kept away from public view, which made Stan feel a little shitty about looking at it. The way Tweek was acting, it was like Stan had been intruding on something that wasn't meant for anyone outside of Craig and Tweek's relationship. Like an outsider's touch would sully something sacred and pure.

He expected Tweek to hurry away as soon as the bag was relinquished, but he didn't. In fact, he did the exact opposite. Tweek sat down in the row of waiting chairs, keeping himself two seats away from Stan.

“Why’d he give it to you,” Tweek muttered, tapping his fingers against the back of the bag. It made a gentle thudding noise under the intermittent pressure, steady and rhythmic; oddly soothing, while simultaneously being rather annoying. “He said he’d leave it outside, not that he’d leave it with someone else outside. I don’t get it. He said he’d do something and he didn’t do it. Well, he sort of did, but — Jesus Christ!”

Tweek jerked his head to the right, and that side of his face scrunched up in response. He breathed in, and then turned to stare at Stan.

“Why did he give it to you?”

“I — ” Stan cut off, confused. “I don’t know? You should ask Craig, not me. I have absolutely zero idea what goes on in that guy’s head.”

“Me neither!” Tweek exclaimed. That caught Stan by surprise, and he made a face that communicated as much. Tweek wasn’t looking at Stan anymore, however. He’d turned to stare down at his knees, one of which he was bouncing anxiously. “I mean — he says I get him. I *understand* him. But that’s news to me! Because I — *ah!* — I don’t! He’s confusing as hell! I can never tell what he’s thinking, and it drives me — *eurgh* — crazy!”

Stan had absolutely no idea how to respond to that, so he remained silent. He decided not to let Tweek in on the fact that he was not the guy to go to for relationship advice, figuring instead that it was better for Tweek to let it all out. The guy seemed stressed — even more so than usual, if that was at all possible. But, once again, Tweek did the exact opposite of what Stan was expecting; this time, by remaining silent. Apparently he’d gotten everything off of his chest that he’d wanted to. It felt a little weird, like somehow this business was unfinished, but Stan didn’t really want to hear about Tweek’s relationship problems. Stan had enough of his own to keep him occupied.

The boys were silent for the better part of a few minutes. This silence was different from the one he’d experienced with Craig. While Stan had been on-edge around Craig, he’d not felt overly tense. It was a casual sort of silence, one that you had when you were around someone who you knew, but not really. The silence between himself and Tweek, on the other hand, caused thick tension to spread through the air. Tweek was just one of those people that Stan felt inclined to talk to — or, it felt like Tweek should be talking. Or maybe, just maybe, the person wasn’t the thing changing things. Maybe it was the same, and he just really wasn’t a silence person.

When the bell rang for the start of third period, Stan glanced over to Tweek. He expected Tweek to stand up and hurry to class, but, exactly like the two times before, Tweek did not do the thing that was expected. That struck Stan as strange. If he was already naturally anxious, why wasn’t he concerned about missing a class?

“Dude, don’t you have class?” Stan asked.

“No,” Tweek answered. “I have third period. *Agh!* I mean, I have a free period — third period is free. It’s — it’s advisory. I don’t have to be anywhere.”

“So... you’re waiting for Craig?”

“Of course I’m waiting for Craig.” Tweek adjusted the bag, lowering it so it was design-down on his lap. He jerked his head again. “Wouldn’t — *arghh* — wouldn’t you wait for Wendy?”

A pang of something hit Stan. The impact was enough to make him feel winded, but he forced himself to reply, anyway. “Yeah,” he said. He caught Tweek glancing over at him, an expression of wary disbelief carved into his eyes.

More silence. During it, Stan wished for Tweek to say anything at all, just to break the tension. But when Tweek spoke next, he realized he’d much rather deal with the silence. “Why’d you hit my — I — Jesus, man, why’d you hit Craig?”

Stan cleared his throat, scuffing the sole of his shoe against the tile that covered the hallway floor. It made a shallow squeaking noise. Stan did it again, just to fill up the quiet, as he contemplated his response. “Honestly?” he finally said. “I have no idea.”

“Bullshit,” Tweek said. It was so sudden, Stan startled. He glanced at Tweek, who had sped up the tapping of his fingers against the messenger bag. “You don’t just hit someone without a reason. God, man, I don’t know, I just — I want to... get it? Like, I want to understand why you hit him. Because, I — I don’t want to hate you, or dislike you, or whatever, but... but that’ll be really hard to *not* do if I don’t know where you came from. Or, try to empathize, or whatever.”

“You can dislike me,” Stan said. “I don’t care.”

Tweek made another yelping noise, one that was deep in his throat. It sounded almost similar to a growl. “I do!” said Tweek hurriedly, his shoulders tense. “I care! I don’t want to dislike you. That’s the point. It’s not about you caring about if I like you, it’s — I don’t *want* to dislike you. I don’t like disliking people — Jesus, it’s too much pressure.

“And I don’t care why you hit him. I don’t care. I mean, I care that you hit him, but, like — I mean — *ack!* — I know Craig can come off a little strong sometimes, and I know not everyone likes that. He’s gotten into fights before. I just — I want to... know. So — so, why did you hit him?” Tweek was avoiding Stan’s gaze the entire time he was talking. Stan had to admit, he was impressed that Tweek had managed to say so much in just a couple of breaths. It came with the territory of talking to a theatre kid, he guessed. He knew nothing about theatre, but he was pretty sure they did monologues and shit in those types of classes.

So, with all the effort Tweek had put into that semblance of speech, Stan felt absolutely obligated to respond. “Craig said some shit about Wendy. I don’t know, I guess I just kind of... reacted, y’know?”

Just like that, Tweek was looking at Stan again. But this time, his expression was firmer in its disbelief. He’d loosened his grip on the messenger bag significantly, and his leg had ceased bouncing quite as hard as it had been. Slowly, Tweek asked, “are you lying to me?”

“What? No,” Stan answered quickly.

“At least try to sound genuine when you say it, then,” Tweek said, frowning. “Christ — because, the way you’re talking right now, it sounds like you’ve gotten into the habit of lying.

And — Jesus — I don't even think you realize it, man. It's like some hardcore Shakespeare shit."

Confused, Stan asked, "how does Shakespeare relate to this?"

"*Agh!* Too much pressure — " Tweek's voice cut off short, and he lowered his head to stare at the ground. His leg began to bounce again. "Shakespeare has thematic deception in some of his plays. Suspected deception, self-deception, and plain-out deception — *eurgh* — I *really* don't wanna go into the psychology or — or whatever, or something — of this shit, but... my point is, you don't sound genuine. You're too casual to have an emotional connection to what you said. It makes you sound like you're lying."

All of that information came at Stan much too quickly. At first, he wasn't sure how to handle it. He'd never thought of himself as a liar, and he'd never thought of himself as someone who would actively deceive anyone. It gave him a sense of disbelief, and he stared at Tweek incredulously. "I'm *not* lying," he said, slightly offended at the accusation.

"There!" Tweek suddenly exclaimed. He pointed at Stan, but quickly dropped the gesture when he caught Stan's expression. "That was real! You *felt* that."

Everything about this situation was perplexing to Stan.

"Look," Tweek began, his voice much quieter than it had been at any other point in this conversation. "I don't know what's going on in your life, okay? Like — I have no idea. And I don't know if I can handle knowing, so, don't... don't tell me, but, I think — I mean, you didn't ask for my advice or anything, but I think this is important, so — I... try to get out of the habit of lying. At least, like, look at yourself and say, 'okay, yeah, maybe I'm not actually feeling this way' and... feel it? Feel — like, feel the way you actually feel. Just chill, y'know, and it'll all be okay."

Once again, Stan was absolutely shocked at Tweek's statements. He was, for lack of a better term, lost for words. Hearing someone talk so avidly about how they saw him was weird, and he was seriously unused to it. He didn't know if anything that Tweek was saying had any legitimate value, but something about the whole experience told him it had come from a good place. He'd take it into consideration, at least, that was for sure. It wasn't like he was totally clean from lying, anyway. He'd been less than pure these past few weeks.

Stan wanted to thank Tweek, but he also didn't want to. Thanking someone for something unproven was just going to prove that Tweek was right, and if Stan acknowledged that Tweek was right, it would pretty much be admitting that he knew he was being deceptive. Or, had realized it, when he truly hadn't. Everything about this was giving him a solid existential crisis, and it tugged him out of his skin in a widely uncomfortable way. He didn't feel like he was lying. He didn't feel like he was anything.

The silence was beginning to settle again, and Stan knew he wouldn't be able to handle stewing in the back of his brain with some really deep Shakespeare-esque psychological mind-fuck. Thus, he allowed himself to delve into the simplicity of curiosity. He made a vague, open-handed gesture towards the bag in Tweek's lap, and asked, "did you draw that?"

Tweek gave Stan a sideways glance. “Draw — *ergh* — draw what?”

“The design on the front. Did you draw that?”

“Oh.” Tweek’s eye shut, and Stan anticipated another head-jerk, but none came. He figured this must have been a calculated movement, and decided not to dwell on it. He watched as Tweek traced his fingers over the back of the bag, his nails catching on some loosened seams. “No. No, I — not really. I mean, the flowers, and space, and guinea pigs, no. I’m not good at drawing. It’s not my thing. It just — stresses me out.”

“Did you draw any of it?” Stan asked.

“No. I mean, yes. Yes I drew — I drew a couple of things. The things that don’t look good, those are the things I drew. Otherwise, I just... stuck to writing.”

Stan grunted in response, hooking his wrist around the handle on his own backpack. He wasn’t really very good at leading a conversation that was based in questions. “Oh. Cool. So you know French?”

“I don’t *know* French. I know bits and pieces of French. I’m in French. I’ve been in French, I — no. But, yes.” Suddenly, Tweek made a low noise in his chest and shut both eyes. “If you’re asking if I wrote the French, I did.”

The curiosity in his chest was sparking again, and Stan instinctively leaned a little closer. He tried to see if he could peak at the designs, but Tweek was keeping it covered extremely well. He even leaned away when he noticed Stan edging closer. Testing his luck, Stan decided to ask a few more questions. “What does it say?”

Stan’s luck had run out. Tweek’s tics came back full force, making him yelp quietly and twitch under any outside gaze. This was obviously not something that Tweek was comfortable talking about. “Jesus, man — I don’t know. I mean, I do know, but it’s — *argh* — it’s none of your business.”

Stan could respect that. Even though he was a little disappointed in the fact that he wasn’t going to get a translation from Tweek, he decided not to push it. It was probably best if he tried to keep things as light as possible — for his own sake, if not for Tweek’s. “Right,” he said, resting himself against the backrest of his chair. He adjusted in the seat a little more, uncomfortable. He’d been sitting here for a long time, and his lower back was starting to feel numb. “So, who drew the rest of it?”

“Butters,” Tweek answered. His shoulders lurched, which made Stan feel tense from just watching. Not too much later, Tweek began to bounce his leg again. “Butters — he... he’s — he did. It. The bag.”

Stan quirked a brow. “So... Butters gave you a bag that he drew on, and you wrote French on it and gave it to Craig?”

“No. I bought the bag. I — God, do you always ask so many questions?” The question wasn’t meant to be answered, though. That much was made obvious by the quickness in which

Tweek continued talking. “I bought the bag, I asked Butters to draw some designs on it, and then I gave it to Craig. It was a gift.”

Vaguely, Stan wondered if that was why Tweek was so protective over it. He certainly held it like it was important, and the way he defended it made much more sense. “Oh,” Stan said. He wasn’t sure how to continue the conversation, so he decided to go for simplicity. “Cool. It looks neat.”

“If — ” Tweek lifted the bag up again, hugging it against his chest. He turned his head just enough to look at Stan out of the corner of his eyes. “If you want one, ask Butters to make you one. He’ll do it in a heartbeat. He — *ergh* — he loves it.”

I’ll pass, thought Stan, but that’s not what he said. Instead, he replied with, “okay. Cool.” The idea was cooler than it probably would be in reality. Stan had never thought of himself as very artsy, and while he could appreciate a good drawing or two if it passed him by, he’d be undeniably embarrassed to tote around something with flowers on it every day. That, he supposed, was where he and Craig differed.

The door of the principal’s office creaked as it opened, and Stan glanced up instinctively at the noise. Craig stepped out of the inner office, and kicked the door shut behind him without much thought or consideration for the decently loud bang it caused. Although the way he’d shut the door might have made people assume he was angry, surprisingly enough, he wasn’t. In fact, he looked as calm as ever. The corners of his mouth did twitch up just the slightest when he noticed Tweek, however. As soon as Tweek realized what was going on, he stood.

“Hey, babe,” Craig said. His voice was still monotonous, but it was soft. Caring, in a way that made Stan feel guilty and sick. The way Tweek smiled back at him, and the way he looked up at Craig with light eyes, only worsened the guilt. It reminded him of the way things should be between himself and Wendy. It told him that a relationship was supposed to look sweet and nice, like this; not bitter and stressed like his own. More than anything, though, it hurt.

It hurt to watch Craig kiss Tweek on the forehead, and it hurt to watch Craig’s hand carefully cradle the back of Tweek’s head as he did. His heart squeezed. He felt it squeeze, right in the center of his chest, where he knew he should feel the comfort of love. At the same time, though, he didn’t feel it. He didn’t feel the happiness he used to around Wendy, and sometimes, he wondered if he ever had. It threw him for a loop that he wasn’t prepared to hurdle himself through. He drew in a deep breath, following Craig and Tweek with his eyes as they hugged. They spoke to each other in a hushed murmur; the type that Stan would probably be able to make out if he tried, but he really didn’t want to. He couldn’t.

“Bye, Stan,” Tweek said, giving him a little wave. Stan had been so caught up in his internal goings-on, that he’d not even noticed that they’d separated and prepared to leave. Craig had his messenger bag back, and it was slung over his shoulder the exact same way it always was. There was an amused flare in Craig’s eyes, the same one that reminded Stan of the fight. It was weird to think that, maybe, just maybe, Craig really *did* think of all of this like it was a game.

Craig flipped Stan off, but he let the gesture fall when Tweek gave him a disapproving look.

Tweek and Craig walked away. They passed him, comfortably disappearing down the hallway. And of course, to top it all off, they were holding each other's hands. It made Stan feel uncomfortable, but not because of the fact that he didn't have that. He felt uncomfortable, because he knew that *he* was the reason that he didn't have that. Distressed, distracted, and upset, Stan tried to tuck himself into the plastic chair he sat in.

"Stan Marsh."

Stan glanced over. He wasn't surprised to see the secretary, looking at him with a calm, smile of an expression. The last place he wanted to be was in the principal's office, but he didn't have a choice. He knew he didn't.

Stan hoisted his backpack over his shoulder and followed the secretary inside.

Chapter End Notes

if any of y'all know French, lemme know if i made a mistake! im going off of memory, so i wouldn't be surprised if i messed it up, haha.

im not entirely certain when i'll post the next chapter, but i can tell you for a fact that it'll be up sometime this week. it all depends on when i manage to finish chapter 20. :P

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Mea Culpa

Chapter Summary

His chest began to hurt when he realized it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The car ride home had been humiliating. His mother hadn't said anything the entire way, and he didn't blame her for it. The solid look on her face was enough to key him in on the fact that she was thoroughly upset. And, although he wanted to ignore the way the world was spinning, he just couldn't. He understood just how mad she must have been, and no matter how hard he tried to shut it off, his brain wouldn't quit his natural empathetic response. To put it simply, he felt bad. He felt really, really bad.

He spent most of the ride watching his mother steer the car, all the while contemplating the way he should break the ice. But then his mom started to talk, and he turned himself away. He stared out the window, listening to her say things about how he was going to throw his life away if he didn't change. She told him that he shouldn't have ever thought to turn to violence; she expressed just how thoroughly disappointed in him she was. And throughout her tangent, her topics of interest became significantly more general.

Why were his grades dipping? What was this about missing homework? Why did he get forty-four percent on his last math test? Didn't he study for it? His teachers were e-mailing her, didn't he know? How could he let himself get so far behind? Don't make this a repeat of last year, Stan, or the year before. Or the year before. Don't this, don't that, why this, why that, how could you, how could you, how could you?

How could you get suspended?

Like a light switch, his body shut down. The only thing keeping him from drifting away from reality completely was the rhythmic *bump bump bump* of his head against the glass of the passenger's side window.

It was moments like this, where his everything was sucked out of him, where everything felt like it was collapsing, that he wished for it to stop. He'd curl in on himself, toss the covers over his body, shut his eyes, and will himself to cry just so he could feel like he was *doing* something. It was the only thing that felt like it helped, although he knew that it probably wasn't the healthiest thing in the world. Especially when these episodes hit on the weekend, and he had no reason to leave bed. Worse yet, when they happened during a break from school, where he had a week of absolutely nothing.

That was his record.

A week.

Seven days.

One hundred and sixty-eight hours.

Ten thousand and eighty minutes.

Six hundred and four thousand eight hundred seconds.

Of doing nothing.

The car rolled over a pothole in the road, but Stan didn't react when his head suddenly came into sharp contact with the sturdy glass of the window. Distantly, he heard his mother ask him if he was okay, but he didn't answer. *I'm fine*, Stan's brain silently replied. *I've felt worse*.

When they arrived at home, Stan continued to stay silent. Nothing his mother said got through to him, even when her expressions begged him to respond. He kicked off his shoes, and dropped his bag down next to the door. Everything around him, all of the objects and pieces of the house he lived in, all of it, felt like a dream. Like something that was incorporeal and fake. He'd never really been one for philosophy, but there was something appealing about the idea of it all truly *being* fake. Like this being a simulation of what a reality could be. He contemplated if it could possibly be true, and if so, why did he exist? Did he serve a purpose? What was the point? He was just doomed to die in the end. Everyone was. The intricacies of human conscience when set out as a comparison towards the "bigger picture" were absolutely asinine.

"Stanley." This time, Stan broke out of his haze. His fingers were twitching against his arms, where he was hugging himself tightly. He hadn't remembered doing that. He really hadn't. Another thing he didn't remember doing was sitting down on the couch, but apparently he'd also done that, too. He glanced over his shoulder, towards where his mother stood by the front door. Her coat was still on, and so were her shoes. Within her hand, she still held her keys. "I have to go back to work. Will you be alright by yourself?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm fine, Mom."

She frowned at him, but she said nothing further. She left without a goodbye, and locked the door behind her. He gazed out the window, and watched her drive away, with little to no thought. A few minutes after he came to recognize that he was alone, Stan lowered himself to lay down on the couch. He curled up on his side, tucking one arm under his head as a substitute for a pillow. He closed his eyes. He took in a deep breath. He existed.

He tried to bury himself into the same, tranquil feeling that he'd been able to float in at school, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get it to come. Stan was stuck, always finding himself opening his eyes to stare at a television that wasn't even on, or to gaze

longingly at the digital picture frame that swapped through memories that he'd all but forgotten. There was a weird, situational boredom that collected deep in him. It bore a hole into his skull, and while he craved entertainment of some kind, he couldn't keep his attention on anything for more than a second. Furthermore, his joints and muscles were far too exhausted to move. There was nothing, he realized with abated thought, that interested him. ~~Except for one thing.~~

So, when he found himself moving on autopilot, with thoughts swirling down from his head and into his spine, he was shocked. He caught himself, midway through standing up, and forced himself to sit back down. Even though he could picture the scenario clearly, and he wanted nothing more than to lose himself the way that never failed him, he would not let himself do it. Stan scrubbed his fingers through his hair, closing his eyes to keep himself from seeing his closet and the Jameson whiskey bottle that was buried under his old Toolshed outfit. It had been symbolic at first, wrapping the bottle up in the white shirt. He'd been proud of himself at thirteen, tying that belt around the bundle like some fucked up, make-shift bow. After three years of struggling, he told himself, he'd finally done it. And he hadn't touched it in almost four years, but he still struggled with the idea of it being in there. He wrestled with the urge to take it out again, and every time he saw one of his mom's bottles of sparkling water, it threw him towards his closet into a downward spiral of *just one sip couldn't hurt*.

He was almost four years clean, though.

Like fucking *hell* he would let himself sully that.

Stan shoved himself up from the couch and walked, less than graceful, to his backpack. He took his phone out of the front pocket. With his back against the door, he slid down, huddling with his knees tucked against his chest as he tapped in his pass code. He was fine, he told himself. He was fine. He just needed a distraction. Everything was okay. This would pass. It would pass, it would pass, it would pass.

He texted Kyle first.

KYLE

Today 12:01

hey dude I got suspended, dont wait up for me at lunch

As soon as he sent it, he felt wrong. Like he'd just betrayed some trust that he'd been unaware of. In the back of his mind, he knew he should have texted Wendy first. She was his girlfriend. They'd been dating since the third grade. Why wasn't she his first instinct? Why wasn't he texting her first? Stan cursed under his breath, trying to keep his cool in the midst of the distress he was working through. He sent her a text, too, and hoped that Kyle and Wendy didn't notice the order of the sending.

WENDY

Today 12:03

I got suspended, so just a warning, my mom might not be super happy if you come over later.

Once he'd texted the two of them, Stan let himself slouch against the front door. He scooted over, squishing himself between his backpack, the door, and the wall, so he was more thoroughly enclosed. He wanted to make sure he was keeping himself as contained as possible, so he wasn't tempted to escape himself and the rest of the world. He didn't want to lose control. He hated losing control. So, he decided, he wouldn't. It was juvenile, thinking that he could control the prospect of losing control, but it felt good to tell himself he could keep everything in check. He'd done it for years, what would be so difficult now?

He nearly leaped out of his skin when he received a text notification. He felt equal parts dread and excitement as he navigated to the texting app.

KYLE

Today 12:06

I don't want to say I told you so, but I told you so.

Before he could stop himself, Stan smiled warmly at his screen. He pressed his knees closer to his chest as he replied.

KYLE

you said absolutely nothing about me getting suspended so you should take that back

Kyle's response was almost immediate.

KYLE

LOL. As if.

I'm not getting caught up in the semantics of what was or was not said in that bathroom. My point is still the same.

Stan snickered, absentmindedly chewing on his lower lip. He tapped a few different responses, each one a more simple variation of the last. An edge of humor was always there when he and Kyle texted. It was practically unavoidable. That was just the way things were. And while Stan was significantly less tech-savvy than Kyle, and easily got frustrated by the perplexing and elaborate inner workings of such hardware, he never found it hard to get himself across in messages when it was Kyle. Things just felt a lot more natural, and...

His chest began to hurt when he realized it.

Something in Stan's lungs squeezed, and he hooked his arm through one of the straps of his backpack. He clicked his thumb nails against his phone screen, biting down harder on his lip.

The skin tore, and he flinched, tasting iron. Just one slip had caused his lip to bleed again. He made a pained noise, finally releasing his lip from between his teeth. Thankfully, he wasn't bleeding bad enough for it to drip down his chin. It was mostly spots, as he discovered when he pressed his sleeve against his lip. Just little spots, and the sting.

KYLE

what happens in the bathroom stays in the bathroom

Stan swallowed, and waited. He couldn't explain the feeling if he tried. It was something so instinctual, he wasn't entirely sure if he was totally aware of it himself. He just — wanted Kyle to talk to him. He wanted that connection, no matter how infinitesimal, or seemingly fleeting, because to him, it'd always be infinite. He was embarrassed when he caught himself flicking backwards through his and Kyle's text conversation. And smiling. He was fucking *smiling* like a girl looking at the texts she'd gotten from a crush, and —

His phone buzzed. Immediately, Stan clicked on the notification as it popped up at the top of his screen.

WENDY

Today 12:11

I'm coming over anyway. <3

Stan couldn't get a breath in. He hesitated, reading it over and over and over again. He was happy, he told himself. He was happy that Wendy was coming over. Because he loved her. And he did, he loved her so much, he cared about her, she was so dear to him, and he loved spending time with her. Every moment with her was something natural, and soft, and lovely.

WENDY

ok

That message made Stan feel guilty. He wanted to tell her he was excited to see her, but something stopped him. Distantly, so, so distantly, Stan latched onto the idea that she deserved better than him, and nothing he could say, or do, would ever be enough.

So he kept it simple.

WENDY

I love you. :)

Stan's breath hitched.

WENDY

I love you too

He struggled to draw in any air. All he could do was swallow through the dryness in his throat, and try not to gag at the lingering taste of blood, even though his lip had stopped bleeding. He gripped the side of his backpack, staring at the contours of the zipper and trying to settle himself down. This was fine. It was okay. Everything was okay. Just breathe. He didn't need his inhaler, he wasn't going to throw up, and he wasn't lying. He wasn't a liar.

Temptation dug its ugly nails into his skin again, and while Stan was in the middle of forcing it back down, Kyle texted him again.

KYLE

Today 12:18

Seriously, man? That's so overdone.

It was such a contrast to what Stan had been experiencing, that he wheezed out a laugh.

KYLE

idk what youre talking about, that was totally original

And he lost himself. Huddled in the corner of the foyer, with the door pressing against his left side, his backpack against his right, and the wall keeping him upright from behind, he lost himself. He didn't know how much time, exactly, he spent texting Kyle. He lost track — and whenever there was a lull in the conversation, as Kyle decided to pay attention in whatever class he was in, Stan busied himself with how they'd interacted thus far. He read the jokes, the subtle jabs at each other, the nonsense of friendship. They rambled about WoW — which neither of them had played since they were twelve — and entertained the idea of getting the band back together.

As they shared crappy memes with each other, a knock came from the front door. Stan flinched, startled by the volume of the knocks, which was amplified since he'd been leaning the side of his head against it. Now that he looked up from his phone, and recognized the world around him, he realized that he was actually starting to get really uncomfortable. His spine ached from being hunched over in a corner for so long. Honestly, sitting next to the front door walled in by his backpack felt really weird. He'd think it almost creepy, if he had the time, but he didn't.

Stan stood, rolling his shoulders back. He heard and felt little cracks and pops as he did, which gave him a mild sense of relief. He felt his phone buzz in his hand, and although he was tempted to check out what Kyle had sent, he forced himself not to. He knew that he'd just slip back into the comfort of their conversation, and that wasn't what he wanted to do. Stan dropped his phone off in his backpack, deciding to push it out of his sight, so he wouldn't feel enticed by it.

He wasn't surprised when he found Wendy outside his door. She had said she was coming over, and he expected nothing less. She looked at him, her eyes wide and expression happy. He smiled. She stepped into the house, and tugged off her jacket. Stan shut and locked the door behind her.

"Hey, Wendy," he said.

"Hi, Stan," she returned.

And then, it was quiet — but only for the moment it took for Wendy to set her things down. She moved slowly, and with purpose. He'd always loved that about her. The way she moved could be borderline hypnotic at times. More than once, he'd found himself just watching her.

Wendy turned and stepped right up close to him. She wasted no time in wrapping her arms around his neck, gently smoothing back his hair. She was so tender. She was so sweet. She was so loving. So, so, so loving. Stan returned the embrace, holding her waist with his hands. She was so close, and he could smell her shampoo. It smelled of berries and the good kind of artificial. He remembered a time where she'd smelled of cinnamon and coconut. In a way, he could smell it now; but only slightly. It was a faint memory, the ghost of a smell that he missed almost dearly. The aroma of berries and remembrance of coconut gave him a sense of the past. When she'd gone through the roses phase in middle school, and started using perfume that Stan could only describe as smelling "sparkly". He pressed his face forward, nudging against her cheek with his nose, and pressed a gentle kiss against her skin. He wanted her to feel loved.

He wanted her to be happy.

"Oh, Stan," she whispered. She turned her head to give him a kiss on the cheek, careful to avoid the bruise that had become an angry shade of red. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Forgive me?" he replied. He said it jokingly, but it didn't feel like a joke to him. She giggled into his ear. The sound sent a shiver to go down his spine, and the hair on the back of his neck to stand on end.

"I'm not mad at you," she told him. She carded her fingers through his hair, then, continuously fidgeting with it. "I'm just concerned. Punching someone out of nowhere is extremely unlike you. I'm still really shocked that you did that."

"I know," he said. He tightened his grip on her waist. "I know. I honestly just — don't know what happened."

"It's fine. I know." Wendy pulled away, just enough to look him in the eyes. There was something in them, making them glitter like glass. They were beautiful. She was beautiful. She deserved better. "And, I... I know it didn't come across earlier, but... I think it's really sweet. That you protected me."

Stan almost choked on air. He'd practically forgotten about Craig's improvisational excuse. "Oh," he uttered, subconsciously lowering his head. But then, she tipped his head up.

“Look at me,” she said. He obeyed. “I thought it was sweet, but really, really unnecessary. You can protect me, Stan, that’s fine. I get it. It’s probably a testosterone thing, or something... but, promise me that you won’t hit anyone in the future.”

Stan nodded. “I promise.”

Wendy smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling happily. She roamed her fingers through his hair a few more times, before settling her palms at the back of his neck and glancing down. He knew that look. He’d seen it countless times before, and he’d almost definitely given it to her countless times. Her gaze was glued in glances to his lips. She was usually the one to make the moves, but she appeared hesitant. It drove him crazy. He lifted one of his hands from her waist, gently cradling the back of her head. He ducked, lowering himself so the height difference wasn’t nearly as much of an issue, and he kissed her.

He could feel her mouth smiling against his as she kissed back. But then, she pulled away. Their faces were still so close, and he could feel her breath as she asked, “doesn’t it hurt?”

“It’s fine,” he replied, meeting her lips with his for another kiss. And it was. His lip hurt, of course, and it was sensitive, but he’d be lying if he said he didn’t kind of enjoy the sting. “Just try not to bite.”

Wendy nodded. Satisfied with that being the end of talking, Stan pressed forward more, peppering her mouth with soft pecks. He circled his arm tighter around her waist, supporting her lower back with his forearm. They smiled against each other as they kissed, carefully moving with each other. They navigated blindly towards the couch, and she dropped one of her hands to feel behind her as they bumped into the back of it. Stan gave her one more quick peck, before going in for a deep, passionate kiss. He could feel her smile fade as she focused more on reciprocating. Their lips clicked in the few times they separated, a gentle noise that spurred both of them on to go further.

Stan grunted when he found himself being pushed over onto his back on the couch. Wendy swiftly crawled on top of him, closing any space that might linger between them. The pressure of her over him was comforting, and familiar, and safe. He brought both of his hands back down, trailing his fingertips down her shoulders to trace gentle, loving touches and caresses down her body to her waist. She loved them; she always had. She rolled her hips against his at the teasing of his fingers as he slid them up her shirt. Her skin was porcelain soft against his palms. He’d asked her, once, if his rough hands had bothered her — it was after he’d picked up guitar again, and the calluses were particularly noticeable. She’d said no, and that had surprised him. She had said that she liked the roughness. She enjoyed feeling the hands of someone who’d worked enough to make them imperfect. Stan remembered being speechless at her words. She had such a talent of making him speechless, in all the times where it mattered the most. Like this, when they were intimate, and their hands were roaming over each other’s bodies, mapping out everything coolly, and calmly. Being with Wendy was natural. It was so natural. She knew him, and he knew her, and it was wonderfully beautifully perfectly nice.

And it was so different, compared to being with Kyle. Kyle was fiery, and rough, and passionate in the most adventurous ways. He was headstrong, and a leader, and he liked being

in control. It felt so different, it was so strangely, peculiarly, fantastically different. Kyle was so palpable, and bright, and real.

It felt wrong. It felt so wrongly right.

Stan felt dirty, filthy, and stained for craving Kyle.

He felt guilty, guilty, guilty, for thinking about his best friend while Wendy was pressed against him, taking up all of his space, as he gave her his. His cheeks burned as she trailed kisses down his neck. He didn't feel like himself as he dipped his fingers under the waistband of her leggings. He smoothed his free hand down her back, leaning up to kiss her again and again and again, while the hand that worked to lower her pants drew closer to the crotch of her underwear. She gasped quietly against his lips, and he told himself this was okay. He wanted her to be happy, he told himself. He wanted her to feel good.

Until he wanted it to stop.

Stan pulled away from the kiss, but kept his hand where it was for now. This was wrong. He knew it was wrong. He couldn't keep this up. He couldn't. He could hear Tweek's words echoing in his mind, talking about deception and calling him a liar. "I'm sorry," he apologized. His voice cracked, but he couldn't tell if he was on the verge of crying or not. He felt like he wasn't there. Wendy was looking at him, no longer moving her hips. "I'm sorry. Can we stop?"

There was a split second of surprised silence, where Wendy looked at him in shock. But it was only a split second, and she reacted appropriately. "Of course," she said. He moved his hands from her, and looked away as she tugged her pants back up, and she shifted off of her position, where she'd been straddling his legs. Not a few moments later, they were situated upright, next to each other on the couch, and Stan was anxiously digging into his knees with his fingers. Her expression was nothing but sympathetic, and it hurt him. It hurt him so much. It hurt him, because he knew he was about to hurt her. He couldn't bear it.

He couldn't bear it.

"Are you okay?" Wendy asked. She reached out to him, gently rubbing his back with circular motions. He didn't reply right away. He was terrified. "Stan? What's wrong?"

"I — " he hardly managed to choke that one word out. He wondered how he was supposed to tell her what he'd done at this rate. Just a single syllable, that was so common for him to use, was impossible. She was patient. She was loving. She was kind. She didn't deserve this. She deserved better.

She always deserved better.

"I have something to tell you," Stan mumbled. He gazed at the carpet through stinging eyes. "And you're really not going to like it."

aaa i was gonna wait until later today to post this but i couldnt hold back, lol
next chapter will be up on sunday! :)

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Mea Maxima Culpa

Chapter Summary

Stan did.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Stan? What happened?”

Stan could hear the frown in her voice, breaking her words down with the undertones of worry. The concern she was giving him was equally as evident in her touch, circling between his shoulder blades in a way that was supposed to be comforting. But it wasn't. He felt sick, and tired, and dirty, like he could feel the germs and dirt and grime covering him from head to toe. He hated this. He hated this so much. His brain tried to scrabble itself inside out, worrying itself to death about why he'd dug himself into this fucking hole. He needed an excuse, said the part of himself that he hated. Sickeningly enough, that same part of him tried to brush it off as looking out for Wendy. *She'd be so hurt if I told her the truth*, said the devil on his shoulder. *You can't do that to her. Just break it off, and don't tell her why.*

“Stan, answer me.” Her voice was more insistent this time, and just a little thicker. She sounded mature. So much more mature than he was, or ever could dream to be. And he fucking pitied himself. He pitied himself for pitying himself. He hated his brain, and the demons in his closet. He despised the fact that he was jealous of Wendy. Because he was horribly, terribly, depressingly jealous of how composed and put-together she was. His shoulders were shaking, and he tried to get them to stop, but he couldn't. He felt like he couldn't move.

“I — ” His voice refused to leave, and the air got stuck in his throat. He tried to swallow it down, and when that didn't work, he tried to clear his throat. Neither approach worked, and he panicked, drawing a large intake of air, just to push it out. Ashamed, he croaked, “I cheated on you.”

Kyle's face flashed before his eyes, and for a split second, he was able to pretend. A distant memory had been brought up, one of Kyle laughing at him as he overplayed some dumb joke. They'd been at Stark's Pond, and it had snowed a good foot the night before. Kyle's coat had been in the wash, so he'd decided to go without. The cold temperatures froze him through, and he was shivering so hard by the time they reached the bench, that Stan had given him his own coat. *I doubled up on layers*, Stan had said, tugging at the tan windbreaker when Kyle tried to protest. *Just take the coat, man.* Not a few moments later, Stan had fallen into a particularly deep section in a nearby snowbank. He still remembered the way Kyle snorted at his expense, and he remembered the way he hadn't minded one bit. Sure, Stan's

jeans had been caked in water and sludge, and he'd had to take a hot shower once he got home to get all of the leaves and blades of grass off of his legs, but it felt entirely worth it. At the time, he hadn't recognized what he had been feeling.

The memory helped, for a moment. But then he remembered where he was, and why it was so quiet, and he felt like the world was going to crush him in its grasp. He breathed in heavily. "I'm so sorry," he said, scraping his nails against a thin rip on the knee of his jeans. He tried to talk again, but ran out of air immediately. He had to take another breath. "I have no excuses, and I — "

The carpet blurred underneath him. Stan couldn't get enough air. His lungs felt full, but there was nothing in them, and he forced himself to breathe through it.

" — I feel fucking awful and — " he drew in another breath. " — you deserve so much better. You deserve so, so much better, and — "

Were his hands shaking? His hands were shaking. Stan was struggling to keep himself still, and he'd picked multiple threads out of the rip. The hole was bigger, now, and he was fucking upset because now he'd have to throw these pants away. He couldn't stand wearing things with holes. But he couldn't stop. He couldn't stop tearing the threads out, and twisting them between his fingers, only to break them and start the process over again.

" — I just want you to be happy, because I love you, I really, really do, but I — " His throat felt rubbed raw. He looked at Wendy, searching her face for any type of reaction, but there was none. She was just looking at him. She was staring at him, blank and devoid of emotion, like she'd been drained of everything that made her human. It was horrifying. He'd done this. He wondered if he had a right to feel horrified, or if maybe he was *supposed* to feel horrified. Maybe it was an unspoken obligation, after doing something so horrible. " — I don't want to keep hurting you."

"You..." Wendy began. Her voice was so meek, so mild. She'd fallen pale. "You don't... you don't hurt me, Stan."

"But I *will*," Stan said. He couldn't keep still anymore, and he jumped up from his seat, beginning to pace around the coffee table. "Maybe I haven't yet, but I *will*. And I can't just sit idly by and let you let me do that to you. It'd kill me."

He ran his fingers through his hair, coming to a stop next to the digital picture frame. Looking at it made his blood run cold.

"I know I'm a selfish person," he continued. Wendy opened her mouth to reply, but he cut in before she could say anything. "Don't even try to say I'm not, because I am. I mean, I guess being selfish is a part of human nature, but, it's like... I'm worse than human nature. I'm poisonous."

He didn't know where that came from.

"And I'm not okay with letting myself ruin any chances you have of being with someone better."

Wendy was staring at him as he finished. He was breathing heavily, trying desperately to fill his lungs with enough oxygen. Every muscle in his body, every bone of his skeleton, every fiber of his very being told him that he needed to sit down. But he couldn't convince his legs to move. They were locked in place. He felt like a statue, caught in Wendy's gaze. Like a game of *Museum*, but involuntary. Her mouth hardly moved as she asked, "are you breaking up with me?"

Stan nodded.

Her eyes dampened in a way that crystallized her iris and made the rest of her expression fall. "Do I get a say in this?"

"Wendy, it wouldn't be right," he said. "Maybe someday, in the future, if I become better — "

"Stop making this all about you!" she snapped. Immediately, Stan shut up. Wendy balled her hands into fists, keeping them stiff on her lap. "Don't you get it? I'm a person, too, Stan. I have feelings. I have thoughts. I *love* you. Why don't you think we can work through this?"

He scrambled for a proper thought. "I — I *cheated* on you — "

"I know that," she hissed. "I heard you the first time. I just don't understand why your first thought was 'lets break up', and not 'lets fix this'. Do you not think this can be fixed?"

Finally, she unclenched her fists. She pressed one palm against her chest, just below her collarbone. She was glaring at him, now. There was a fire rising in her. He could see it reflecting in her eyes, furiously stubborn in her stance. She wouldn't take any shit from him. She looked determined to get all information out of him.

"Are you using this as an excuse?" she asked. The concept hit Stan like a train.

"No!" Stan replied, but he didn't know.

"Then what, Stan?" Wendy stood. She approached the coffee table that separated them. He shut his eyes to erase the way she was looking at him. "What makes you want to break up so badly?"

"I love you, Wendy," he said. He breathed through the stinging in his eyes, and tried to ignore the throbbing that was starting to return in his face. "But... but I don't know if I love you the way you deserve to be loved."

When he opened his eyes again, everything started to fall down around him. Wendy's face was red, now, and it held an anger — a true, honest anger — that he hadn't seen in years. It made his chest crush itself into a million little pieces. He could feel each and every crack, every crevice, every notch, that had been etched into his heart. He watched Wendy cross her arms over her chest, officially closing herself off. "Who?" she demanded, and Stan gulped.

"What — "

"*Who*, Stan?" she repeated. She leaned forward, her stare almost incriminating. "Was it Red? Heidi? *Bebe*?"

Stan turned his head away, embarrassed and ashamed. “No — no, it — does it matter who it was with?” he asked. “I still cheated. I’m still awful — ”

Her brows furrowed, and her mouth scowled. “Who was it, Stan? *Who?*”

“Kyle.” The word escaped him before he could stop it.

And then she just looked at him. She looked at him, with her eyes wide open, and her lips closed tightly. Her face displayed how she felt loud and clear. *Betrayed*. And then, against all his better judgment, he repeated it.

“It was Kyle, okay?”

And he was quiet. He was quiet, more quiet than he’d ever been in his life, but he felt like he’d overcompensated. He could hear the words in his ears, over and over and over again. The awful, insensitive phrase. It felt personal, so terrifyingly sensitive, because it gave away what he’d done. It gave away a piece of him that he’d only wanted to share with Kyle in the moments that they’d been closest. Now Wendy knew what they’d done together.

He felt violated. He was so, utterly embarrassed at the idea of anyone else knowing what he did in private, even if that “private” could technically count as someone else’s business. He wondered if Tweek had ever felt like that.

“Kyle?” she finally said. Her face softened, like she understood. Then, she turned around. She turned her back on him, and walked briskly towards the front door. “Oh my god. You’re *gay*.”

Stunned, Stan followed Wendy. “I’m not gay,” he said frantically, watching her as she haphazardly tugged on her jacket.

“Oh yeah?” Wendy laughed. It was an emotionless, hollow laugh, one that told Stan she was hurting, and was trying to deflect. She tossed her hair back, tying it up into a quick ponytail. “You cheated on me with a guy, and then you broke up with me. That seems kind of suspicious to me.”

“I’m not — ” he broke off when he realized she wasn’t listening. She snatched up her backpack, and began to open the front door. “Wendy — Wendy, wait, I’m not gay — Wendy, please, *wait* — ”

“No, Stan!” She looked at him. Her eyes were burning. But then her expression broke, and she turned away. “I’m done waiting for you.”

The door slammed behind her, and Stan was left speechless.

He was reeling, his hand still half-extended towards the door. It had happened so fast. Was she gone? Had she left? He expected the door to open, and for her to come rushing back in. He expected something to happen, but nothing did. Was that it?

Is this...

Is this it?

Stan stumbled backwards, allowing himself to fall to his ass on the stairs. He rested his hands on his knees. He combed his fingers through his hair. He breathed. He breathed. He breathed.

He dug the heels of his palms into his eyes, unsure of whether he was trying to think, or just trying to distract himself with the lights that exploded in the darkness behind his eyelids. He'd read an article, once, about what those bursts of light were, and why they happened. It had been months since he'd read it, so the information was stale in his memory. He could recall bits and pieces, like the illusion of light was simulated due to one part of the eye rubbing on another part. It created a falsification of something that wasn't there, based on pressure on the tissues... or something. Was it weird to say he felt like a burst of light? Something temporary, shining brightly for a while, and then fading into the darkness. Every organ in his body rejected the idea as ridiculous. There was a reason he wasn't a poet. There was a reason he wasn't academic. There was a reason he'd been on the football team.

He couldn't remember what the reason was, and it was scary.

"Oh, God," he droned, finally removing his hands from his eyes. He blinked the real light away, trying to savor something he couldn't put his finger on. He rubbed under his eyes, around his nose and cheeks, trying to wake himself up. He winced when his fingers dug into the bruise. "Get yourself together, man. You're single."

Yeah.

He was single.

Stan sat up straight, glancing towards his backpack.

He thought of Kyle. He thought of their text conversation, of their jokes, of their teasing. He scooted forward just enough to hook his foot through one of the straps, so he could tug it closer to him. Once in arm's reach, he grabbed his phone from within the front pocket. He was almost surprised to see a notification. He'd forgotten that he hadn't read the last message Kyle had sent.

It was from half an hour ago, and it read simply.

KYLE

Today 14:57

Call me.

Stan did.

The phone rang four times before Kyle picked up. There was a weird noise coming from somewhere in the background on Kyle's end. It was static-y and full of the average white noise of phone calls, but even with the trained ear of someone who'd made many calls in his lifetime, the noise was strange. He brushed it off as unimportant.

“Hello?” Kyle said, his voice crisp in comparison to everything else.

“Hey, man,” Stan replied. “It’s me.”

There was a pause. And then, abruptly, the pause was over. “What the hell is *wrong* with you?”

Kyle’s voice was angry. Immediately, Stan was confused, unsure of what Kyle was referring to. Slowly, Stan said, “look, I’m sorry I didn’t reply to your text. Wendy came over, and I had a lot of shit to deal with there, but — Kyle, listen — ”

“No.” Kyle cut him off. His voice crackled over the line. “No, you listen to *me*.”

“...what?”

“Don’t *‘what’* me,” Kyle growled into the receiver. “You do not *get* to *‘what’* me. You know just as well as I do what this is about. You’ve — I can’t believe you. I cannot *believe you, Stan*.”

“What? Calm down. What are you talking about?”

“*Weed?*” Kyle’s voice cracked, but this time it wasn’t the fault of the connection. He was straining his voice, and Stan could hear it in the way it scratched. He sounded parched. “You stashed *weed* in my *dresser*?”

Stan felt all of the color drain out of his face at once. He was suddenly lightheaded, and it was all he could do to keep himself upright. Even just sitting was proving to be a difficult task for him. He slowly lowered his head, keeping his phone pressed to his ear.

“In what world do you think that’s okay?” Kyle exclaimed. “In what *universe* do you think that’s even *remotely fine*? Is that why you said we couldn’t smoke anymore? Because you didn’t even *have it*? Was that big, emotional speech of yours a lie? Was it a cover-up? You know what, don’t even *answer* that. Of *course* it’s a cover-up.”

“Kyle, please, I can explain — ”

“*Explain?* Do you understand just how much fucking *trouble I’m in right now?*” Kyle was beginning to sound distraught. The ends of his words were clipped and harsh, like he was fighting with himself just to speak. “You *know* how my parents feel about drugs! And you decide to stash it inside of my room? *Have you lost your fucking mind?*”

Stan’s ears felt hot. His heart was beating so fast, so incredibly fast. He wondered if he’d ever be able to calm down. “Please — ” Stan choked, but recovered quicker than he was able to, just so he could try to get out an explanation. “Please, hear me out, it’s really not what you think — ”

“Not what I think? *Not what I think? You asshole!*” Kyle was shouting, now. He was letting it all out, every word and every sentence he could think of was tumbling out of his mouth. His phrases gained a rambling quality, one that he only got when he was desperate. “Is this what you think of our friendship? You think you can use me as a fucking *storage box* to keep all of

the shit that inconveniences you? That you don't really feel like keeping anymore? Did you run out of space in your locker again? Is your closet too full to handle a single *fucking bag of weed*?"

Stan said nothing. He couldn't. Even when Kyle stopped ranting, even when he waited for Stan to say something, he couldn't. Stan was back to borderline hyperventilating, trying to grasp for something — *anything* that would keep him afloat in this ocean of bullshit that he'd recklessly tossed himself into. This was too much. It was too much, it was all too much.

Too much too much too much.

Kyle made an extremely frustrated, angry noise. It echoed in the distance, like he'd tugged the phone away from his mouth to scream.

"You're *pathetic*," Kyle said. "You're *fucking pathetic*."

All Stan could manage was, "I'm so sorry."

He heard Kyle scoff on the other end of the line. "Save it for your *girlfriend*, Stan. At least you can fix it with her."

Stan's breath hitched.

"You know what?" There was a rustling noise in the background. It was so loud, it almost covered up Kyle's voice, which had suddenly gone very, very quiet. "Don't talk to me. Don't call me, don't text me, don't message me. I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to *look* at you."

He... hadn't heard that right. That wasn't what he heard. Kyle hadn't said that. Surely, he hadn't, right? There was no way... a lifetime of friendship couldn't just get dropped in a heartbeat like this, could it? Stan swallowed the sick feeling that had started to build up in his throat. "How long? For... ever?"

Kyle drew in a deep breath. "I don't know," he replied, his voice a hushed whisper. "I just... I have to go. Goodbye, Stan."

Kyle hung up.

Stan dropped the phone.

His mind was blank.

Was he supposed to feel something? Because he didn't feel anything. It was like this rising, rising, rising feeling, that stuck to his core and made him lose all ability to breathe, but then, when the big *whoosh* of everything hitting at once was supposed to come, he just felt... numb.

Maybe something inside of him had broken? Stan pressed his palms to his chest, trying to evaluate if he was still breathing. He'd become suddenly, frighteningly unaware of the automatic movements of his own body. Breathing in felt like nothing, and breathing out felt

like nothing, and blinking felt labored and harsh. He couldn't separate what he was really seeing, with what he wasn't, and his body felt like it was floating out of itself. He didn't feel real. He didn't feel alive, and even though it was fucking ridiculous, he was terrified that he'd somehow died. He scrabbled at the skin on his arms, scratching with his nails and staring widely at the front door.

Stan reached up, taking hold of the banister with an iron grip. Was that it? Was that... it?

Is this it?

One by one, Stan climbed the stairs. He forgot about his phone, and forgot about his backpack. He forgot about the door, he forgot about the couch, forgot about the coffee table. He forgot about the weed. He forgot about his split lip, and the bruise on his cheek, and the digital picture frame. He stalked into his bedroom, collapsed in front of his closet, and forgot about his promises and streaks and cleanliness and sobriety.

He forgot, he forgot, he forgot, he forgot...

Stan clawed out his whiskey and forgot himself.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be posted on wednesday :)

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Mawkish Ruins

Chapter Summary

A flicker of hope.

The next morning, Stan regained consciousness with a pounding headache and an uncomfortable tightness high in his stomach. It took him an extremely long time to coordinate his brain with his body, and for most of that time, he couldn't figure out where he was. He refused to open his eyes, fearful of the light that was filling the room from the window. His regained awareness came slowly. He could feel a mild tingle in his arm, which he now understood that he was laying on, and his everything felt like it had given up halfway through. He hissed in a breath when his alarm began to play some shitty rendition of the entertainment news in podcast form.

Stan tossed his arm out to the side, groping around for the "off" button on the damned thing. He almost cried in relief when he found it, and the obnoxious voices cut off to fill the room with silence. His arm fell immediately, dangling off of the bed. He didn't care nearly enough to pull it back to his body. Comfort was something he'd given up when he made the executive decision to be a stupid motherfucking dumbass the night before.

Jesus Christ. He was too fucking exhausted for that shit. He'd feel sorry for himself once he'd slept for another six trillion hours.

It was wishful thinking; he knew. But there was a part of his brain that told him if he just kept his eyes closed, he wouldn't have to deal with the realities of the outside world. Or any world at all, for that matter, because he saw nothing through his eyelids. There was no orange-ish glare from the sunlight streaming through the window, nor was there a bed underneath him. In fact, there was nothing, anywhere. He was floating. On a big, giant, fluffy cloud, in the middle of nowhere. He was in a place where he could sleep off his horrible life choices. It was a beautiful place. A wonderful, magical, beautiful place that kept him safe and warm and happy.

The illusion was absolutely wonderful, for the entire minute it lasted. He would have loved to continue daydreaming, but that tight feeling in his stomach had turned itself into a violent nausea. Saliva began to pool in his mouth, which was a really weird experience, since it still felt dry as all hell. Stan forced his eyes open as he contemplated what was about to happen. He was in that between stage, where he wasn't totally certain he *was* going to throw up. And, he *really* didn't want to get out of bed if it was a false alarm.

But then his gag reflex triggered, and he was stumbling into the bathroom faster than he'd known was humanly possible.

Stan fell to his knees in front of the toilet. He retched into the bowl, trying to ignore the burning that made its way up his throat. It felt like an eternity, but in reality, it was just a few seconds. And then he was done, and his brain was absolutely *throbbing* in his skull. His aches were only exacerbated by being upright, which made all of this so much more frustrating than it already was.

Slowly, he lifted his hand and flushed the toilet. He was so very tempted to lay down on the cold tile of the bathroom floor. It was so inviting. And bright. And cold. Cold, cold, cold. That would feel fantastic on his aches and pains. His body began to lean automatically, yearning for the comfort that would come from the floor.

No.

Stan shot upright, immediately clutching at his head with both hands, and — oh, wow, the world was spinning. His eyes were closed and the world was *spinning*. Yeah. That's okay. That was fine. Everything was fine.

He scrabbled for something to latch onto, still clutching his head with his other hand. He hoisted himself to his feet, poising before the sink with all of the grace of about six hippopotamus— hippo... hippopotapi? Hippopota...

What the fuck.

Stan pulled his hands none too kindly through his hair, staring at himself in the mirror through half-lidded eyes.

What the fuck had he done? What the *fuck* had he *done*?

Unwilling to think about last night, Stan turned on the faucet and lowered his head. He rinsed out his mouth, grateful for the easing of the burn. When he was done rinsing his mouth, he splashed water onto his face, and rubbed at his skin until he felt thoroughly awake. He still felt like a zombie, of course, but he felt awake, which was more than he could say for himself just a few minutes earlier.

Stan grabbed a towel from the rack and dried his face off. A cold feeling still lingered from the water, but he was no longer damp, which helped him feel a little less like a giant walking piece of shit. He put the towel back on the rack, and picked up his toothbrush. He was careful in brushing his teeth. He really didn't want to accidentally trigger his gag reflex again. He honestly didn't think he'd be able to handle any more vomiting right then.

It was probably best to throw up before he had to go to school, though. Scratch that. It was *definitely* better to throw up before school. He paused his brushing and closed his eyes, trying to gauge whether or not he still felt nauseous. Surprisingly enough, he didn't.

Stan had never really been prone to horrible hangovers. He'd get them every once in a while, sure, but that was primarily from back when he was new to alcohol. He blamed most of that on the fact that he couldn't hold his liquor for shit back then. He knew his dad was much the same way, but Stan wasn't certain on just how much genetics had to do with someone's experience of a hangover.

That wasn't to say he didn't feel like death, though. Because he did. Stan felt absolutely fucking *wrecked* — but he'd had worse. He'd had much worse.

He'd had so, so much worse.

Stan lowered his toothbrush, staring at the water as it dripped from the faucet. His brain felt fried, but that didn't stop it from contemplating the things that hurt him. He was utterly distracted as he spit out the toothpaste. It was fucking ridiculous. This was fucking ridiculous — he couldn't be the only one who found this fucking ridiculous, right?

Was that...

That was a relapse. That was what that was. He'd just fucking relapsed. He'd —

Years of hard work. *Years* of hard work, and pain, and suffering, and pangs and urges and temptation... all of it was washed away with just one bad night, and he couldn't, for the life of him, figure out how he felt about that. In a way, he supposed he felt like he'd betrayed himself. Like that piece of him in the back of his mind, that little corner of his brain that he hated so much, had plotted his demise. Four years of hard work and dedication to being clean, and sober, and okay. He'd fucking ruined it. He'd broken it off with Wendy, and Kyle had cut ties with him, and he'd reacted by *drinking away his problems*, because of *course* he would. Because he was fucking weak. He was fucking weak. He couldn't even keep his dignity straight in this fucked up jumbled mess that his life had become, and —

And the *ironic* thing was that he didn't fucking care. He could say he'd betrayed himself, and he could say that he felt guilty, and it would all be true. But it was all only true to an extent. Because, overall, Stan didn't give a damn.

He just wanted a fucking drink.

He wondered if things could possibly get any worse.

Stan glanced at his pill bottle. The orange of it was dull, and it was only then that he came to the sudden realization that he hadn't taken his meds yesterday. He'd decided to take them after his shower, but he hadn't taken them. He'd forgotten. Fuck. He knew he'd forgotten something. He *knew* it. He just couldn't remember what it had been, because he'd fucking forgotten, and...

And he couldn't take them now, could he? He was supposed to, sure, but he was pretty damn certain that he wasn't supposed to take them with alcohol. Last night was fuzzy enough as it was, and as much as he hated to admit it, he couldn't remember shit. He had no idea how much he'd had to drink. He had no idea how long he'd been asleep. He couldn't remember crawling into bed, or where he'd ended up hiding the bottle, or how he'd managed to set up his alarm properly while black-out drunk.

Stan closed his eyes.

He would not take his medication today. He would take it tomorrow, instead.

For safety reasons.

Stan left the bathroom. He wandered back into his bedroom, unzipping his sweater and shucking it off into a corner. One by one, he shed each and every single article of clothing that he was wearing. He left all of his clothes in a pile on his floor. He'd clean it up later, he told himself as he searched through his dresser for a clean outfit. He tugged on a new set of clothing, and sighed in relief when he was finally dressed and ready for the day. He collapsed onto his bed, forcing himself to ignore the magnetic pull that tried to drag him underneath the covers again. Now that he was resting, the headache was back. It took his relaxation, snatching up his calm in quick, pounding aches. There was a throbbing that had started to root itself in his neck, giving him a horrible stiffness in all of the places he needed most. He rolled his head, trying in vain to see if an adjustment of position would help, but moving only made it worse. The pain of relaxing after tensing was debilitating.

Embarrassingly enough, he whimpered into the open air. He was really starting to feel miserable, now, and it was so unbelievably frustrating. He slouched, burying his head in his hands in an attempt to aid the hurting. He was hit with another wave of borderline debilitating pain, all of a sudden, and he breathed his way through it.

Shit. He was definitely going to need something for this.

Stan hesitated a few minutes before he allowed himself to stand. He was trying so hard to get his head to stop pounding. He was really, really trying. He was in so much pain. He was in so, so, so much pain. He needed it to stop, and he needed it to stop immediately. As an afterthought, Stan picked up his phone (which he definitely didn't remember leaving on his nightstand, but whatever), and pocketed it.

He slowly and carefully made his way downstairs, doing his best to keep himself from jolting as he descended. Each step was like a nightmare, shaking the pain right back to the places where he didn't want it to be. He passed his mom in the kitchen, and ignored the look she gave him when he immediately went for the Aspirin they kept in one of the far cabinets. He pretended not to feel his mother's gaze, even though he was distinctly aware of her watching him. He struggled with the stupid child proof cap *way* more than he should have, and it was embarrassing as hell. His hands were shaking.

He popped the pill into his mouth and swallowed it down, though he almost gagged again at the feeling. Then, without thinking, he grabbed a mug out of the cabinet and poured himself some coffee. He sipped at it warily, and slowly, trying to keep it all down. When his stomach didn't seem to complain, he braved in his sips.

"Headache?" his mother asked. Her tone was suspicious. Stan's only response was a grunt. He didn't trust himself enough to speak. He took another sip of the coffee, allowing himself to be overrun by the smell and the heat. Fuck, he could go for something cold right now. Would putting ice in his coffee be a good idea? Absolutely not. That's a horrible fucking idea. "You were asleep when I got home."

Stan glanced over his shoulder, looking at his mother. He tried not to let his eyes portray anything that he wasn't ready to admit, but that was hard. He wasn't sure what she was

waiting for him to do, exactly, but she was definitely waiting for something. She was just staring at him, expressionless. Again, he said nothing.

“You were asleep for almost twelve hours,” she added.

He wasn’t sure what to do with that information.

“How are you feeling?” she asked. Stan was tempted to respond with so many different sarcastic quips, but ultimately, he stated none of them. He still wasn’t comfortable enough with the idea of talking, and he still had his face buried in his coffee mug. He shrugged. He finished off the rest of his coffee, and rinsed the mug out in the sink. Sharon said something else, he was pretty sure; something about his medication, or about therapy, or how his life was going. It was one of those things, he was certain. Or, maybe it had been all three. He wasn’t paying any attention at all. Stan glanced at the time, and felt relieved when he realized he still had a few minutes before he needed to leave.

Against all better judgment, Stan left anyway. He kicked his shoes on quickly, and swung his backpack over his shoulder.

The air outside was cold, and it cut through his jacket like it was made of nothing more than a few strings. Stan shivered as he hopped down the steps leading to his front door. It felt nice to get some fresh air, that was for sure; even if that fresh air was crisp and dangerously dry. There was something truly soothing about being in nature. It was good. This was good.

Everything was fine.

Stan hesitated in his driveway. He stared at the street. He watched as crisp leaves left over from the fall blew down the road, clicking every time it came into contact. He saw weeds that had grown in through cracks in the driveway, and then died at the coming of winter. This year didn’t have very much snow. It had been pretty warm in Colorado recently, even though it was almost February. He didn’t know if that was because it had been a weak winter, or if it was just the onset of an early spring.

He turned his head to the left, and found himself looking at Kyle’s house. He wouldn’t say he felt envy, but in a way, he was jealous. Stan was jealous of the dynamics of Kyle’s home, the way they were so organized and normal. His parents had a stable relationship, and they were genuinely good people. Sometimes, Stan struggled to see the goodness in his own family. His mom was good, he knew, but she had a weird way of showing it. His dad cared, but he didn’t care about the right things. It was just... overwhelming. Like a catastrophe, waiting to happen, and...

In some ways, Stan wondered if the catastrophe had already happened. Maybe last night was the catastrophe, and this was it. He was left, standing in the center of a deserted, destroyed town, in the aftermath of a massive storm that had wiped everyone else out of existence.

Stan’s breath caught in his throat when he saw the Broflovski’s front door open. Out stepped Kyle, and Ike. Kyle was holding onto Ike’s hand tightly, while Ike seemed to more or less just be along for the ride. He watched Kyle fumble with the keys as he locked the door behind

him singlehandedly. Stan felt like a creep as he continued to watch them walk down the sidewalk. And, when they were passing his driveway, he reacted automatically.

“Kyle!” he called. He stumbled quickly forward, still not quite as coordinated as he’d liked to have been. His headache was disappearing, at least. He felt a tinge of hope when Kyle stopped walking, but it was extremely short-lived. As soon as Kyle caught sight of Stan, he scowled. His eyes were glaring, but they were dark and blank. Stan came to an abrupt halt a few feet away from them. “Kyle, hey — ”

Before he could say anything else, Kyle tightened his grip on Ike’s hand and tugged him forward. Ike stumbled, but caught up with the pace his brother was setting relatively quickly. Stan saw a confused look cross Ike’s face. He knew it was a bad idea, but Stan had lost all ability to make rational decisions at this point. So, he began to follow them.

“Don’t ignore me. C’mon, man, please. I know I messed up. I’ve said I’m sorry. And I — I can make it up to you. I can — ”

“Stop following me.” Kyle’s voice was dead, utterly expressionless. Even so, his words were firm. He meant it. Stan’s pace stuttered, but Kyle and Ike kept marching. Stan knew he should be deterred. He knew he should give Kyle the space he kept asking him for, but — but just the *concept* of losing Kyle felt like a stab in the heart. He was afraid that Kyle would like his life better if Stan wasn’t in it, and Stan couldn’t handle that. He couldn’t. He —

He began walking again, doubling his efforts in order to keep up. “Please, I’m begging you. Kyle.”

“*Stop following me*,” Kyle repeated, significantly more insistent. “Leave me alone. I don’t want to talk to you.”

“But you haven’t let me explain,” Stan said. He was frantic. He was desperate. He needed *something* other than what he was getting. “At least let me explain — ”

“No!” Kyle let go of Ike’s hand and whirled around. His face was pale, which made the dark circles under his eyes stand out even more. It was like they were a million times worse than they had been yesterday. Every day that passed, he looked worse and worse. It was frightening.

Stan swallowed thickly, searching for a way to talk to Kyle now that he had his attention. His nerves were making his shoulders shudder. Lightly, he asked, “are you okay?”

That was the wrong thing to say.

Kyle snapped.

“No!” he shouted. “No, I am not okay! Do I look okay to you? Huh? *Do I?*”

Kyle gestured widely to himself, and Stan was caught off guard with just how off-balance he seemed. Ike was staring at Kyle, looking concerned and confused and slightly distraught.

Stan felt bad for Ike. He felt awful that Ike had to see this. He felt horrible, because it was his fault.

“Do you understand just how much *pain I’m in?*” And then, as if Kyle had misspoken, “how much pain *you’ve caused?*”

Stan struggled to find words for that. He glanced around, nervous about someone watching this happen. He was thankful when he saw no one, but he was still vaguely paranoid. He didn’t want Craig to be hiding behind some shrub, or whatever, videoing this on his stupid phone to use as blackmail. Kyle rarely lost his composure like this.

“I just want you to leave me alone, Stan!” There was something that began to settle, somewhere deep in Kyle’s eyes. He looked like he was somewhere else entirely. “Is that really too much to ask?”

Finally, Stan couldn’t take it anymore. He’d had enough of getting yelled at. He’d had enough of being the bad guy — even if he *was* the bad guy. There was only so much he was able to take. “Why are you antagonizing me so much?” Stan snapped back. His head gave a warning throb, but he paid it no mind. “It was just a little weed — ”

Stan immediately regretted his words. He saw Ike’s eyes widen in shock, and he glanced between his brother and Stan in quick succession. “Shut up!” Kyle exclaimed. “Just — just *shut up.*”

Kyle turned and took Ike’s hand, storming off quickly towards the bus stop. Stan followed them a few more feet, bitter anger boiling in his blood. He was filled with the urge to shout, to scream, to retaliate — but... slowly, he came to a stop a dozen yards away. He couldn’t do it. He didn’t have the energy, nor did he have the wish, to hurt Kyle any more than he already had. The day had started off shitty, and it was all thanks to Stan Marsh, fuck-up extraordinaire. So, those dozen yards away, Stan gave up.

He wouldn’t pursue Kyle. It was obvious that he didn’t want to talk, and it was obvious that Stan was pretty much dead to him, anyway. There were just some instances in life, where you had to learn to let go.

Stan watched Kyle and Ike at the bus stop. Kyle turned Ike towards him and crouched down so their faces were level. Kyle brought Ike in for a hug. Ike hugged back. It was a very familial, brotherly moment that they shared. Ike gripped at the back of Kyle’s coat, and buried his face into Kyle’s shoulder. And then, Ike gave Kyle a pat on the back. Like he was telling him, *it’s gonna be okay.*

Kyle drew back from the hug. Stan was too far away to see if Kyle had smiled, but he was pretty sure he had. Kyle brushed off Ike’s shoulders, the same way Kyle had brushed off Stan’s just the other day. It was a quick motion, that was surprisingly sensitive, and meaningful, and protective.

Stan felt the bus pass him by, and his hair was pushed by the wind. Kyle ushered Ike onto the bus with a pat on the back. Then the bus’ doors closed, and the bus drove away, and Ike was gone.

And Kyle was still there, but at the same time, he wasn't. He was gone. Kyle followed the bus with his eyes, his shoulders slumped as he held himself, hugging his arms against his chest. Stan contemplated approaching. He contemplated walking up and giving Kyle a hug, but he was frozen stiff. He was afraid to get too close. He was afraid of scaring Kyle off like a rare wild animal, never to be seen again.

Kyle looked back, and his gaze caught with Stan's. They stared at each other. Kyle, although obviously unhappy, ultimately didn't react in the negative way Stan expected him to. It was a relief. A flicker of hope. A small, faint, little flicker of hope, a single drop of water in the desert, an oasis — he saw it.

But it wasn't real.

Kyle turned his back on Stan and walked away.

Stan just watched. He would have liked to pretend that he could have done something other than watch. He entertained the idea of hugging Kyle into forgiving him. But he knew that wouldn't work. People didn't work like that. No one worked like that.

He drew in a deep breath, and hung his head in shame. His eyes threatened to close, and his brain threatened to tip him over, but his legs refused to listen. His spine kept him straight, and his muscles kept him upright. He drew in another deep breath.

He told himself that everything was going to be okay. He didn't believe it at all, and his brain was entirely aware of this, but Stan didn't care. His body needed to hear it. His body needed to be told that *everything was going to be okay*, even if it really wasn't.

He wondered if he'd ever be able to forget Kyle. He knew that he couldn't.

Intermission III

Chapter Summary

I want to melt into the sofa and never move again.

I can't right now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

January 25th, 2013

Stan,

I'm trying to write to you more often, but it's hard. School is taking up everything, and by the time I get home, I have no more words left in me. Just simple phrases like "how are you?" and "what's up?" are beyond what I'm capable of.

I want to melt into the sofa and never move again.

But I'm writing to you now, so there's that, I guess. Even though I have to admit, I'm not writing to you because I want to. Not this time. I'm writing to you because I have to. I need to.

Because I have so many feelings in my brain, and I don't think I'll be able to express them to you. Y'know. Verbally.

I liked to think that I knew and understood you. It made me feel better, when I looked at you as a person, and allowed myself to step into your shoes. Sure, you do dumb things sometimes, but I can always relate. I can say, "Yeah, okay, he did that because A, B, and C."

But as we get older, I'm finding myself getting more and more... I don't know, apathetic, I guess? And a side effect of that apathy is me not being able to see things from your point of view. At first, that scared me. Like, when we got high, and you kissed me. And I kissed you. And it was wonderful. I liked it a lot. And I couldn't read you. I got scared. So, I freaked out.

I used to think my apathy was the only thing that got in the way of our friendship, but I see now that I'm not the only one to blame.

Because you're there, too. This is a relationship, however platonic, and there are two sides to every relationship. There's my side, and then there's yours.

When I found out you hid weed in my room, I was furious. I was livid. And I was hurt. I felt like you'd used me. Even though I'm pretty sure I didn't truly think you'd used me, there was a little voice in my head that wanted to believe you used me. That voice told me to hurt you.

But then it all comes back around to bite me.

There's something I'm not telling you, Stan. I need you to know that. But I can't tell you what it is that I'm not telling you. I know. It's a dick move, to tell you I'm not telling you something, but then go out and say "but I can't tell you". But I'm not ready. It'd hurt too much for me to say. It'd hurt too much. I'm working on it. I swear to everything that is holy, I'm working on building up the courage to tell you exactly what I'm not telling you, but...

I can't right now.

Please understand that.

And, please, try to empathize.

Step into my shoes, and try to understand why I don't know if I can forgive you.

I'll write when I remember. Can you write me a letter this time, please?

I'm lost.

Sincerely,
~~your super-best-friend~~ Kyle.

Chapter End Notes

happy halloween, everyone!
next update will be posted on sunday :)

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

A Piece of Chocolate

Chapter Summary

He took the bottle of apple juice and slid it into his parka pocket.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As the day drew on, Stan's mood only darkened. He hardly managed to stay awake throughout his first four classes, and he finally succumbed to his exhaustion when he sat down for fifth. The only thing that broke him out of his dissatisfying nap was the bell for third lunch. He wasn't excited. He was a teenage boy, sure, but he was also a teenage boy dealing with some of the mid-to-late stages of a hangover. No matter what, that hangover would win out on whatever hunger he might have.

His teacher gave him a disapproving look as he stood from his seat, having lingered a moment too long. Everyone else had already packed up and fled the class, talking to their friends in excited chatter. The monotonous background noise was enough to make Stan's brain shake, and he felt the overwhelming urge to keel over and vomit as soon as he exited the classroom. Fortunately enough for him, he managed to swallow down the disgusting churning in his stomach, and the nausea faded at the end of its wave.

Stan breathed a sigh of relief and stalked his way down the hallway with absolutely zero energy. The only thing he could think of was the fact that he felt absolutely disgusting. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into the shower with the water on freezing cold, and shiver himself to sleep. He'd never actually done that before, he mused, digging into the front pocket of his backpack to withdraw a few dollars. He came to a stop in front of the vending machine, which he sincerely hoped hadn't been shut down. The school had some dumb policy that stated students weren't allowed to use the vending machines during lunch hours, which Stan found absolutely stupid. All he wanted was a bag of fruit snacks and a bottle of apple juice. Was that really such a crime?

He poked the "3" button with his finger, and frowned when it didn't do anything. The number didn't pop up on the digitized screen, and that was when he knew the school had fucked him over again. Overcome with an overwhelming range of emotions, Stan had to resist the urge to thunk his head against the plastic screen of the vending machine. The fruit snacks stared at him dauntingly from within the giant box. He drew in a deep breath, and stepped sideways, stopping in front of the drink vending machine. If this one didn't work, he'd have a fit, but for now, he could deal without the fruit snacks. They probably wouldn't agree with his nausea, anyway. Solid foods sounded awful right now.

Stan almost cried in relief when he found that they hadn't unplugged the second vending machine. He quickly jabbed at the numbers and letters for his apple juice, and then pushed a dollar into the slot. The machine took his money quickly, and he watched, bored and anxious for some weird reason, as the coil *slowly* turned to release the apple juice. It came free with a click, and then it thudded loudly against the metal when it fell. Stan pocketed the rest of the money and crouched, picking out his apple juice. He quickly unscrewed the top to take a sip. As soon as he did, though, he made a face. He swallowed what was in his mouth, and screwed the cap back on. He didn't want the rest.

Christ, he thought, glaring at the juice. *This tastes like shit. Guess I'm having water.*

Stan held the apple juice bottle in the crook of his arm as he searched for the money he'd deposited into his pocket. It took him far too long to find that stupid dollar bill, but when he found it, he made a vaguely triumphant noise. It was extremely quiet, however; his head hurt too much to do much more than open his eyes halfway and keep himself upright. He punched in the code for water, fed the dollar into the slot, and nabbed the bottle of water after it fell. He untwisted the cap to the water and sniffed it. It didn't *smell* offensive, which made sense, considering it was water. He took a very small, experimental sip. He was relieved when it tasted normal. He didn't know how he could survive without something to hydrate him. If worse came to worst, he *supposed* he could have gone to the drinking fountains, but the water in them tasted like chemicals and sadness. He'd had enough chemicals and sadness for about six lifetimes.

Still depressed about the fact that his apple juice was crappy, Stan slid into a seat at the table closest to the bathrooms. The table was empty, and he was relieved that he'd be able to have some alone time. He wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, nor was he in the mood to listen to anyone talk. For now, he would just deal with his thoughts in silence.

He would have liked to, at least. He didn't have the chance. Before he'd realized what had happened, a flurry of orange had disoriented Stan's vision, and Kenny was suddenly sitting across from him. He had his hood down for once, which Stan wasn't sure how to feel about. He thought about asking, but didn't get quite that far. The toothy grin he had been getting from an overly-cheerful Kenny had faded quickly into a troubled expression. Stan quirked a brow, trying to ask him what was up without needing to say anything.

"Dude!" Kenny suddenly said, his eyebrows raised in an empathetic look. He folded his arms on the table, leaning his weight on them. "You look hella sad. Did Wendy break up with you again?"

"No," Stan replied. He wasn't sure what had motivated him to talk, but there was this weird urge to spill his guts to someone he could trust. And, if there was one person he could trust more than *literally* anyone else right now, that person would be Kenny. Stan played with the thin paper label on his bottle of water. "I broke up with her."

That left Kenny speechless for a solid thirty seconds. He glanced around the lunch room, as if expecting to see cameras or something for a prank. Quickly, he settled back into his seat, looking at Stan with pity. "Aw, man, I'm sorry to hear that," he said. "Why? Did something happen?"

"I..." *cheated on her multiple times with my ex-best friend when we were both high as kites.* Stan shook his head to rid himself of that response, however tempting it would be. "... no. It just... it wasn't working out."

Something in Kenny's expression told Stan that he didn't believe him, but Stan wasn't too concerned about it. He turned his head down to watch himself pick and tear at the label. He made a small grunting noise when he noticed the empty space in front of Kenny.

"Aren't you going to get anything to eat?" Stan asked. He almost winced at the look Kenny gave him.

"I already ate," Kenny said. That was bullshit, though, and Stan knew it. He had to admit, it kind of hurt to know that Kenny had resorted to straight-up lying to his face, but he wasn't surprised. It was just the type of guy Kenny was.

"I can buy you something, man," Stan offered. "Seriously, I don't mind."

Kenny reacted immediately, shaking his head. "No, you really don't need to do that. I'll be fine."

Stan frowned. "Dude," he said.

"I'm not gonna leech off of ya," Kenny interrupted. "New Year's resolution. No more leeching, and shit."

Although he wasn't really sure of how to proceed, Stan knew he had to do something. He couldn't have a friend go without lunch (even if that was *slightly* hypocritical, considering he wasn't eating anything — but his circumstances were much different). So, as his last resort, Stan slid his apple juice across the table to Kenny. Kenny quirked a brow at Stan. "Take it," Stan clarified. "I don't want it."

Kenny opened his mouth to protest, but Stan wouldn't have it.

"No, Kenny, stop. Take the apple juice. If you're so stubborn that you won't drink it, at least take it home to give to Karen, or something. She'd probably appreciate that, right?" Stan was looking at Kenny straight-on, now. Kenny had a surprised look on his face, but said nothing. He took the bottle of apple juice and slid it into his parka pocket.

"Yeah," Kenny said, combing his fingers through the back of his hair. "She would."

The two lapsed into silence, then, which Stan was very much happy with. There had been so much going on in his head over these past few weeks, he'd pretty much forgotten what it was like just to sit and observe. Everyone else's world was turning as normal; the cafeteria was filled with groups of teenagers rambling to each other and cracking crude jokes. They all seemed happy, and totally content with talking to each other. It was simple. It was sweet. It was calm.

Stan thought he saw someone watching him out of the corner of his eye, but when he turned to look, no one was there. He found that kind of odd, and he was a little discombobulated at

first. Otherwise, he brushed it off and tried not to think much of it. He turned back to his water, and took another couple of sips. He nearly choked when Eric pushed his tray down onto the table with a loud *slam*. Stan coughed, trying very hard not to breathe the water in. That would not be good for his lungs. The last thing he needed was pneumonia, or whatever.

He was pretty sure that wasn't how a person got pneumonia, but that wasn't the point.

Eric slid into the seat next to Kenny, and immediately tore into his lunch. He always got the same thing; a cheeseburger and a cup of those weird little potato smiles that tasted like wet paper towels covered in slightly damp cardboard. It was practically a ritual at this point, so Stan was pretty surprised — and yet, really not very surprised at all — when he noticed that Eric had somehow managed to nab *two* cheeseburgers, instead of just one. Stan frowned when he noticed the way Kenny was looking at Eric's food.

So, Stan did the only sensible thing in that moment. He reached over, grabbed one of Eric's cheeseburgers, and tossed it in front of Kenny on the table. Kenny's eyes widened, and he appeared absolutely shocked at what Stan had just done. Eric, too, was flabbergasted.

Also, he was angry.

"AY!" Eric exclaimed, snatching up the cheeseburger and plopping it back on his tray. "That's my cheeseburger, goddammit!"

"Really? You *really* think you need two cheeseburgers?" Stan replied, deadpan.

"Yes, I need two cheeseburgers, that's why I got two fucking cheeseburgers, genius."

Stan glared at Eric, but Eric didn't budge. "Just give him one of your cheeseburgers," he said. "God knows he needs it a hell of a lot more than you do."

"Stan — " Kenny was giving him a look. This *don't push it* look. But, hell, Stan was feeling feisty today. Or, maybe he was just pissed off because he was hungover.

Stan didn't respond. All he did was reach over to take one of Eric's cheeseburgers again. This time, though, Eric wasn't having it. He smacked Stan's hand away, none too gently. Stan wasn't having it, either, though, and he refused to let up. He darted his hand back, trying to nab one of Eric's cheeseburgers.

Two minutes of defending his food later, Eric finally relented.

"Fucking *fine*, Jesus Christ," he grumbled. He smacked Stan's hand away again when he tried to go for it with a bit of renewed energy. "But you don't get to fucking touch them, hippansy."

Stan scrunched up his face, trying to wrap his head around the insult that had just been thrown at him. "What's a *hippansy*?" he asked.

"It's a mix of the words 'hippie' and 'pansy'," Eric replied. He appeared weirdly proud of himself for that, which Stan doubted he'd ever understand. Eric leaned back in his seat, sighing contentedly with his words. "Yep. I made it up. Just now."

“Dude, you made a portmanteau of two of the *least* offensive words you could have used?” Kenny snorted. “Weak.”

“Don’t fucking weak me, fucking — weak you. It’s a port-man-fuck-you, that’s what it is.”

With a laugh, Kenny concluded, “a *portmanfou*. Killer.”

“Just take your stupid cheeseburger,” Eric gruffed. He picked up the extra cheeseburger from his tray and tossed it to Kenny, who caught it just in time. With that, Eric went straight into eating his potato smiles. He made a snide comment about the school being a socialist dunghole and said something else along the lines of, “the fuck, dude”, but that was about it.

When Stan looked away from Eric, he noticed that Kenny was looking at him. He had a smile on his face, something grateful and akin to a *thanks*. Stan just shrugged, uncomfortable with the prospect of nodding himself. His headache was starting to roll back in, which he wasn’t about to willingly exacerbate. To stave off dehydration, Stan uncapped his water bottle and took a hearty gulp.

When he lowered the bottle again, his attention was pulled towards the opposite side of the lunchroom. There was someone sitting, completely alone, at that table, but Stan couldn’t see them very well with all of the light coming in through the windows just behind the figure. He squinted, trying to make out the person. None of what he was seeing processed correctly in Stan’s brain, however, and it frustrated him immensely.

But then a cloud drifted over the sun, and the light dimmed, and Stan saw Kyle.

Kyle was sitting alone, staring despondently at his opened notebook. He was utterly motionless, save for the tapping of the lead of his pencil against the page he was opened to. The scene was mundane, but it held an emotional context that was practically heartbreaking. Stan slowly twisted the cap back onto his water, watching Kyle to see if he would move at all. Nothing. No movement, except for the *tap tap tap* of his pencil.

“Stan, you okay?” Kenny asked through a mouthful of cheeseburger. He was halfway through that thing by now. Stan would be impressed at the speed of which Kenny was inhaling it, but he was a bit too preoccupied with other, more pressing matters. Stan adjusted himself in his seat, trying to see Kyle in the distance again, but he couldn’t. The light had come back, and the only thing he saw of his friend was a dark outline.

“Kyle — ” Stan muttered, lifting his hand to point weakly towards the other end of the lunch room. Kenny followed his gesture, turning in his seat to see what Stan was pointing at. Kenny made a surprised noise, and swallowed what was in his mouth.

“Oh, shit,” he said, leaning forward and squinting. “Dude, he’s here today? Why isn’t he sitting with us?”

Because I’m here, Stan thought, but he didn’t say anything. He just kept staring, examining the silhouette again and again, wondering what was going through Kyle’s head right at that moment. It was then that Eric took interest, glancing up from his meal to see what all of the fuss was about. Seeing Stan and Kenny staring across the lunch room, he turned in his seat.

“What?” he asked, tearing a potato smile in half and popping one piece into his mouth. He chewed noisily with his mouth open as he spoke, having little regard to anyone around him. “What’re you weenies looking at?”

Stan opened his mouth to speak, but Kenny beat him to it. “Kyle,” he answered. He gestured towards the silhouette, burger still in hand. “He’s sitting over there, alone. That ain’t like him. That ain’t like him at all.”

“I dunno, it’s kind of like him.” Eric shrugged. He finished off mutilated potato smile. “He’s fickle. He’s probably found some new Jew friends to hang with. Hell, maybe he found a new jock, too. Oh my god, guys, can you imagine? A jewk. A *jewk*.”

“The fuck is a *jewk*?” asked Kenny.

“A Jewish jock. Duh. Jeez, *Kinny*, get with the program.”

Kenny rolled his eyes. He finished off the rest of his cheeseburger, crumpled up the wrapping, and then tucked it into his parka pocket with the apple juice. He stood, then, but didn’t go anywhere. He just stayed there, upright, like he was waiting for one of them to stand, too. Or both of them. He made an annoyed face, glancing between Eric and Stan like whatever he was doing was obvious. “Well?” he said, nodding towards Kyle. “What’re y’all waiting for? Lets go sit with him.”

Stan glanced to Eric, who had moved onto his own cheeseburger. “I don’t know,” Eric said, feigning exasperation. “It might be best if we leave him alone.”

“Bullshit,” Kenny said swiftly. There was no bite behind his words. “Leaving him alone right now is, like, the worst thing to do. Seriously. Have you looked at him? He looks fuckin’ depressed.”

Stan stood up after Kenny was done talking, picking up his water quickly. He knew he really shouldn’t go talk to Kyle. Like, he *really* shouldn’t, but — he couldn’t just leave him there. Especially when he was so emotionless, just sitting there and going through the motions like a zombie. Stan was afraid that something he’d said had triggered this, but then realized that was a stupid fear to have. He was already certain that he *had* been the one to trigger this. And to think, if he’d have just taken the brunt of his own actions and faced the consequences like a man, none of this bullshit would have happened. His parents would still be together. Kyle wouldn’t hate him. He wouldn’t have relapsed.

That almost made Stan crumple to his knees. His legs shook with the effort of standing, suddenly disoriented by the fact that he felt like he was standing on jello. He’d thought that before — he *knew* he’d relapsed. He’d come to that conclusion multiple times over, he’d been mulling it for hours, but...

There was something about this time. This one, single time, that made it really click into his brain that he’d fucked up. He’d really, truly, and honestly fucked up.

Stan wasn’t sure what Kenny had said to convince Eric to tag along, but whatever it was, it must have been ridiculous. Overall, Stan couldn’t really give less of a shit. He was much

more concerned with apologizing to Kyle — really, truly apologizing with all of his heart. He'd gone through the basics of apologizing before, and he'd said things that he thought would make Kyle happy to hear, but... he didn't really know if he'd meant them. It was a weird, hollow feeling.

The closer Stan got to him, the worse Kyle began to look. That absent tapping he'd been doing with his pencil was now just aimless scribbling. His despondent look was now plain miserable, and he was worrying at the inside of his cheek with his teeth. It was visible in the way he contorted his mouth to do so. Stan wondered how long Kyle had been sitting here, chewing the layers of skin off of the inside of his cheek. When Stan came to a stop immediately next to Kyle, he was both disturbed and unsurprised at the fact that he didn't look up. He hardly acknowledged the presence of Kenny, Eric, or Stan. He hardly acknowledged anything. His eyes looked soulless, and his skin was sickly with a pallor that troubled Stan.

"Kyle?" Stan whispered, leaning down so their faces were level. Kyle didn't move. His hand kept scribbling, his eyes kept staring, his body remained still. Stan glanced warily towards what Kyle was doing. He felt a pang of emotion hit him square in the chest when he saw that Kyle had written something in messy Hebrew, and was scribbling underlines over and over and over underneath a separate phrase. Stan could vaguely make out what the words would sound like, but he didn't know what it translated into. Slowly, as not to startle Kyle too badly, Stan reached over and gingerly smoothed his hand across Kyle's shoulder blades.

Kyle slowly came out of his haze, his head moving automatically to look at Stan. There was a flicker of something deep in his pupils, but Stan couldn't make it out. Stan's concern grew when he realized Kyle was shaking. He was borderline shivering underneath his coat, and Stan could feel it. Even though he was terrified, Stan forced himself to smile.

"Hey," he said quietly, rubbing little, comforting circles into Kyle's back. Kyle didn't respond directly, though he did finally stop scribbling with the pencil. "How are you feeling?"

Kyle opened his mouth a little, but then closed it again. He didn't say anything. He almost looked like he couldn't. He glanced around, expressing clear confusion. Stan had no idea what was going on, and he was extremely worried.

"Hey. Kyle, look at me." Kyle did. He looked at Stan through squinted eyes, and then took a moment to shut them. Stan wondered if he was tired; he looked exhausted. Almost instinctively, Stan set down his bottle of water and pressed the back of his free hand against Kyle's forehead. He didn't feel very warm, which ruled out a fever. That didn't make him look any less sickly, though. Stan contemplated bringing Kyle to the nurse. Kyle's gaze began to wander again. "Kyle, no, keep looking at me. Alright?"

Kyle turned his head to look at Stan again. His reflexes were a little more efficient this time, and he seemed like he was recovering a little bit more, now that he was interacting with someone. He was still shaking, but it had calmed down a tad since he'd first laid his hand on Kyle's back. Stan wasn't sure if that was a good sign, or a bad sign.

"Do you want to go to the nurse?" asked Stan. Kyle furrowed his brows and closed his eyes. He dropped the pencil, and tugged his hands to his jacket. He groped around for something,

like there was a secret pocket somewhere that had all of the answers. Stan watched curiously. “What are you doing?”

“I need...” Kyle finally spoke. He stilled for just a second, but then opened his eyes again. He looked a bit better; he looked a little more like himself. There was a fire in his eyes that hadn’t been there at all just a second ago. Seeing that familiar fire was reassuring, though Stan was still worried. Kyle fidgeted with his coat a little more. “I need to...”

“What? What do you need to do?” Stan was trying to be as gentle as possible. Kyle was in a fragile state, and he knew that.

“Check in...” And just like that, Kyle’s train of thought was gone. He snapped up straighter, suddenly much more alert. He raised his arms, pushing against Stan’s chest to get him to back off. “What the hell? What are you doing here? I told you not to talk to me.”

Stan didn’t want to back off. He didn’t want to leave Kyle alone. He was afraid that, if he did, whatever was happening to him would worsen. He wouldn’t be able to handle leaving him alone like that.

He stepped backward, but only made it a few inches before he heard some racket in front of him. Stan looked up to see what was going on, and he paled when he saw Eric had crawled onto the table Kyle was sitting at. Eric snatched up Kyle’s notebook and stood, glancing over the writing. There was something disgusting that trailed over his lips, a grin that displayed cockiness and arrogance.

“*Ahem*,” Eric cleared his throat loudly, adjusting the notebook in his hands and turning to face the rest of the students in the cafeteria. Stan’s heart pounded in his chest, and he wasn’t sure what to do. Kyle wasn’t moving; he hardly looked like he was breathing. He was staring at Eric’s feet, his eyes wide.

After another few seconds of scanning Kyle’s writing, he cleared his throat again. This time, he caught the attention of almost every other person in the cafeteria. The room fell silent.

“Hello, South Park High School,” Eric began in a very well-rehearsed presenter voice. “And welcome to a live reading of the one and only *Kyle Broflovski’s* diary.”

Chapter End Notes

it's nanowrimo (national novel writing month)! are any of y'all participating this year?

next update will be posted on wednesday :)

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Palm Reading

Chapter Summary

Before anyone could respond to Eric's demeaning remarks, he drew his arm back behind himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Stan had forgotten that Kenny and Eric had followed him over, and as he stared at Eric's sturdy perch on the lunch table, he knew that had been a major mistake. He'd been too caught up in making sure Kyle was alright to realize Eric had begun to hatch another one of his plans. If Kenny had tried to get Stan's attention, Stan was unaware of it. He was flabbergasted — too surprised to move, and rendered speechless.

"Now, let's see what Kyle's been up to," Eric noted, flipping randomly through pages. Stan could see, just barely, past Eric's body at the contents of the notebook. Eric seemed just as surprised as Stan was at the fact that the entire thing was full of Hebrew, and only Hebrew. No English was anywhere to be seen. Stan's heart leapt into his throat, hopeful that all of this would have been a waste of Eric's time. There was no way he could read Kyle's shit aloud, if he didn't know the language.

Stan rested his hand on the table and made to hoist himself up, but found himself distracted quickly.

"Ah, here's a good one," Eric blurted, proudly enunciating the words in the back of his mouth. He came to a stop on the page the book had originally been opened to. He'd spoken loudly, with a look on his face that read he was a firm believer in what he was doing, and the message behind it. If that look were on Eric's face at any other moment in time — particularly a more okay moment — Stan would have thought it neat. But now, in this situation, he just felt afraid. Stan looked at Kyle, trying to gauge his reaction to the whole thing. Kyle was being surprisingly calm, though Stan wasn't sure if that was because he genuinely didn't care, or if it was because he'd slipped back into being unresponsive. Either way, it was concerning, and Stan was left confused at how he was supposed to proceed. Eric, on the other hand, continued with gusto. "*Mizmor ledavid...*"

Stan froze. Kyle had yet to move, but his eyes had widened considerably. He was no longer giving Eric's shoes a dead stare; he was looking up, now, watching Eric gesture with his words.

"*Yevah* — " Kyle visibly flinched at that word. Eric caught his reaction and reacted accordingly, soaking up the attention he was getting like a sponge. Stan could feel himself

shaking. It was ridiculous, he told himself. This was ridiculous. He shouldn't be this panicked at the idea of Eric knowing how to read Hebrew. Stan knew how to read it, too. He just hoped to all that was holy that the alphabet was the extent of Eric's knowledge. After what felt like hours of reveling in the situation (but, in reality, was only a few seconds), Eric cleared his throat, very suddenly, and continued with his reading. "*Yevah roi, lo achsar.*"

Stan's heart felt like it was wilting. Kyle had turned to look at Stan, his face ridden in shock. He looked like he couldn't really understand what was happening, and his eyes were pleading. He was silently begging Stan to do something. And Stan knew he should. He knew he should scramble up onto that table, and push Eric's arrogant ass off. He knew he should kick the shit out of Eric for even *considering* crossing the line of privacy. Kyle had dealt with enough. He deserved a break. Stan's brain was screaming at him to protect Kyle.

"*Binot dasha, yarbitseni; al-mei menuchot yenheleni.*"

But he couldn't. Stan was hearing the words, and he was looking at Kyle and Kyle was looking back at him. And they shared a distressed look, and Stan *knew* that look. He'd seen it only a handful of times before, but it was one of those things he would never forget. Kyle's cheeks had tightened, his eyes had squinted just enough to narrow, like it was just a tad too bright. Stan was overly aware of the rough surface of the lunch table underneath his hand, and the way it shifted every time Eric moved. He knew he should. He knew, there, more than he'd ever known anything before in his life, that he should move.

There was a sinking feeling in his gut, that had collapsed from the bottom of his throat and into his abdomen. It paralyzed him with a powerlessness; an anxiety grew within him. It made his shoulders shake, and his legs were back to feeling like jello. He gripped onto the table with all of the strength he had, desperately telling himself to *breathe, breathe, breathe*.

Something was so horrifically bitter and evil about it. Kyle was looking at him, finally looking *at him*, absent and helpless. He looked slumped into himself as Eric read what he had written. Stan drew in a breath, reaching out to grab Kyle's hand. He held Kyle's hand firmly within his own, squeezing comfortably. Their eyes met again. Without words, Stan made a promise to Kyle.

All the while, Eric continued his reading. The rest of the lunch room looked perplexed; assuredly most of them didn't know what the hell was going on, nor did they understand Hebrew. It wasn't exactly a common second language, nor was there a very large Jewish population in South Park. "*Nefashi yeshovev,*" Eric stated, pausing for a ridiculous dramatic effect. And then, with a theatrical flourish, he added "*yancheni vemagli-tsedek, laman shemo.*"

Stan let go of Kyle's hand. He hoisted himself up onto one of the chairs, and then stepped up onto the table. He stood next to Eric for just a second, feeling disgusted by the smug look on his face. Eric glanced at Stan, his eyes wide in sick delight. He was having fun with this, Stan knew. He thought this was such an incredible leap over the line separating what was appropriate with what was inappropriate, that he found a sadistic pleasure in reading words in a language most of the high school wouldn't understand. A rage began to build in Stan's chest at that realization. For, in that moment, he understood Eric wasn't embarrassing Kyle in front of everyone else.

Eric was humiliating Kyle by confirming aloud whatever was written down.

“Quit it, Cartman,” Stan hissed between his teeth. He reached for the notebook, but Eric turned and held it out at arm’s length. Stan growled, which served to worsen his redeveloping headache, but he refused to allow that to stop him. He stepped forward, maneuvering around the table — and around Eric — to try his hand at snatching back Kyle’s notebook.

“*Gem ki-aled*,” Eric exclaimed. His voice rose an octave, cheeks reddened like he was holding back laughter. “*Begaya almot* — ”

“I said *quit it*.” Stan lurched towards Eric, both hands outstretched for the notebook. He gasped when he found himself without anything to lean on. His foot came into contact with the edge of the table. Before he could stop it, or grab onto Eric as an anchor, Stan found himself hurtling towards the ground. He hit the floor with a loud *thud*, barely managing to catch himself on his forearms. It wasn’t that long of a fall, but it still caused pain to shoot down his shoulders and through his spine. His head throbbed, his neck stiff at the build-up of pressure. He grunted, recovering much slower than he would have liked. He shot a look over his shoulder towards Eric.

Eric had stopped reading off of Kyle’s notebook. Instead, he’d taken to watching Stan struggle to get his strength back. He was grinning, ear-to-ear, and Stan was surprised that Eric’s cheeks weren’t tired from the sheer amount of work the muscles had been doing. Eric looked one more time into the notebook, his eyes scanning over whatever was left on the page.

Stan startled when he felt hands on his shoulders, urging him upright. He looked around for the source of the touch, and settled when he saw it was Kenny. He helped Stan to his feet. His eyes asked, *are you alright*? And Stan could only hope his expression read *I’m fine*.

There was a loud screeching noise that erupted in the sudden quiet of the cafeteria. Kenny and Stan turned quickly towards the noise. Kyle had shoved his chair back and was now standing, glaring up at Eric with a renewed, energized vigor.

“Give me back my *fucking notebook, fatass!*” Kyle shouted. His fists were clenched by his sides, though he didn’t move to use them against Eric. He had control of himself. He’d regained the ability to use his body, and although Stan had expected Kyle to use it as much as he could, he instead kept himself restrained.

Eric looked even more amused at the turn of events. He was running the pads of his fingers over the words on the page, and as he did, he began to laugh. “Who has the upper hand now? Huh, Kyle?” Eric gripped the notebook tightly in one hand, waving it tauntingly in Kyle’s face. Kyle reached out for it, but missed by a good six inches. Eric’s face lit up impossibly further. “What, you want this back? Kyle want a notebook?”

Eric’s tone drew taunting, tight and shallow like he was addressing an animal. His grip tightened on the notebook infinitesimally again. Before anyone could respond to Eric’s demeaning remarks, he drew his arm back behind himself.

“Well? *Kyle want a notebook?*” He repeated. Kyle just glared, standing his ground. Eric’s mouth drew taught. “Fine! Fetch!”

Eric threw the notebook as hard as he could, having little regard for where it would land. Kyle didn’t move from his spot, still glued in his defensive position. He watched as Eric turned away from them, looking right back at the collection of high school students still watching the scene unfold.

“And now, I leave you with these parting words,” Eric announced, lifting his arms up over his head. And, as he said his final statement, he brought his hands back down, bowing at the waist like he was the closing line of a play. “*Al, na refah na la.*”

Eric hopped off of the table, then, coming to a halt in all movement when he was back with his feet on the ground. He stood directly in front of Kyle, and they stared at each other much the same way they always did. There was a sharpness between them: a harsh, cutting static that interrupted everything else around them. The rest of the cafeteria had gone back to their own lives at that point, though their talking had fallen from a loud chatter to a quiet rumble of voices. Stan gulped, his throat thick and unwilling to cooperate with him. He could sense that Kenny had disappeared from beside him at some point, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from Eric and Kyle.

Nothing moved for what felt like forever, until Kyle suddenly shifted, thrusting his arms out harshly against Eric’s chest. The push was useless, though; it made no contact with the target. Even so, Eric wasted no time in stealing Kyle’s arms out of the air. He gripped Kyle’s wrists tightly in his hands, and stepped close enough to eliminate any space between them. Kyle’s arms were bent up at the elbow, his fists clenched near his face. Overcome with instinct, Stan reacted. He moved to advance, ready to beat the hell out of Eric — but a sturdy hand on his shoulder kept him in place.

Stan whirled around, making eye contact with Kenny. He didn’t know when he’d come back, and he didn’t have the opportunity to ask. “Don’t get in the middle of it, man,” Kenny said, nodding in reference to Kyle and Eric’s disturbing interaction. Stan couldn’t help but try to argue, but Kenny shushed him. “Trust me, Stan. Don’t.”

“Isn’t that right, Kyle?” Eric muttered, his voice suddenly breaking through. Stan turned just in time to see Kyle wince, his shoulders tensing. He tried to back away, but Eric kept him pulled close. Stan stiffened, ready to intervene if things showed any signs of escalating, even if Kenny had told him not to. “Well? Isn’t it? *Al, na refah na la.* I bet you say that to yourself every single day.”

“I do not say that to myself,” Kyle protested.

“Yes, you do. You know how I know?” asked Eric. With that, he leaned forward, pulling Kyle impossibly closer to himself. His lips practically touched Kyle’s ear as he whispered something. Kyle’s expression changed, then, and he shied away from Eric the best he could.

Stan stepped forward, preparing himself to pull all two hundred pounds of Eric Cartman off of Kyle, but he didn’t manage to get that far. Eric let go of Kyle roughly, pushing him away. Kyle, unbalanced, stumbled backwards, but managed to catch himself before he collapsed to

the floor. Eric spun on his heel, shoving Stan's shoulder with his own. He leaned down to whisper in Stan's ear much like he'd done with Kyle, but Eric wasn't restraining Stan.

"Keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer," Eric muttered, and then he walked away. A sharp chill crawled across Stan's shoulder blades, overwhelming him with a revolted feeling. He watched as Eric disappeared to the other side of the lunch room — probably to go back to his food. There was a twisting inside of Stan's stomach that threatened to make him lose all of the water he'd had to drink thus far. He wasn't sure how, but he managed to push it down.

Kenny heaved a large sigh from deep in his diaphragm. Just watching the way his chest moved was enough to make Stan ache. He was almost surprised when he noticed that Kenny was holding Kyle's notebook in one of his hands. He'd flipped it shut, revealing the bright red cover. "Here, take this," he suddenly said, shoving the notebook into Stan's hands. "I'm gonna go rip Cartman a new one. You're on Kyle duty, hope you don't mind."

"Wh — " but that was all Stan managed to get out before Kenny followed Eric's approximate footsteps back to the original table. Stan was unsure, and overall a little disoriented. Everything had gone by so fast, with so little rest between anything, that he felt like his head was spinning on his shoulders. He was hardly able to register the fact that Kyle probably still didn't want to talk to him. He glanced over his shoulder, trying to figure out how Kyle was feeling at that moment.

So far, Stan wasn't able to gather much, other than the fact that Kyle looked worn down. Kyle was clutching onto one of the tables, staring down at the floor — or, his shoes? — with little to no expression on his face. A little bit of color had gathered in his cheeks again, and he looked a little more alive than he had just minutes before. His shoulders shifted with every breath he took. Slowly, Stan approached.

"Hey," he muttered, trying to remember how he'd been addressing Kyle before. It'd seemed to work, being gentle and soft and soothing. But that was discombobulated Kyle; *this* was miffed and stubborn Kyle. It showed in the little things; the way he breathed, and the way he blinked. The way his mouth shifted as he adjusted his jaw. Stan saw it in his eyes, too, when Kyle finally looked up at him.

"*What?*" Kyle snapped. He was irritable, and understandably so. Stan would be pretty irritable if he'd been harassed by Eric, too. Stan's silence only served to toss wood into Kyle's fire, though, and his eyes burned brighter. "I'm not a flower, Stan. I'm not fragile, and I'm not going to break. If you have something to say to me, fucking say it."

"Um — " Stan cut off, admittedly unprepared for the outburst. He fiddled with the back cover of Kyle's notebook, casually rubbing his thumb against the cardboard. "I just... I'm sorry. I'm honestly really, really sorry — "

A sharp, trill of a noise exploded in the air around them. The bell. As soon as it sounded, all of the students in the cafeteria jumped to their feet, swarming the exits to the hallway so they could get to class. Kyle responded to the bell just as quickly, swiping his notebook from Stan, and tossing it into his backpack, which he picked up from the floor and hoisted over his shoulder. He began to walk, but as soon as he let go of the table, he lost balance. Stan wasn't

sure how, but he managed to catch Kyle with the brunt of his body weight before he ended up hitting the ground. Kyle grunted when he fell against Stan's chest. Stan gripped Kyle's shoulders, slowly righting him again.

"Are you okay?" Stan asked. Immediately, Kyle tore away, pushing past Stan in a shaky movement. Stan was reminded of the way Kyle had been acting before, and he found himself following Kyle without realizing it. He reached forward to rest his hand against Kyle's arm. "Here, let me help you — "

"I don't need help," Kyle spat, ripping his arm out of Stan's reach. He pushed through the cafeteria doors, turning left down the hallway. Stan got the distinct feeling that Kyle really didn't want to talk to him, but... he couldn't help it. He literally couldn't keep himself from worrying, and that worry evolved into a subconscious need to stay close to him.

"Please," Stan said, jogging to keep up. "At least let me walk you to class. You were acting really weird, earlier, and I don't want to leave you alone if that shit happens again."

"It won't happen again," Kyle grumbled.

"I don't know that, and neither do you."

"I do, actually. Now, if you would kindly leave me alone, I'd be very fucking thankful." Kyle halted in front of his locker, twisting in the combination with trembling fingers. Stan furrowed his brows, watching Kyle's hands closely. *Trembling? Is he afraid of something? Or is it just adrenaline from the Eric incident?* Chalking it up to the latter, Stan decided to try and argue.

"Are you kidding me? How long are you going to keep this up? You can't avoid me forever, Kyle."

"I can sure as hell try," Kyle replied, hoisting his backpack into his locker.

"You're saying you seriously want to never talk to me again?" Stan asked. He'd known the answer already. He'd known it since Kyle had first said it. He just didn't want to believe it. When Kyle didn't respond, he began to talk again. "What, are you giving me the silent treatment now? You won't even try to give me the benefit of the doubt? I made a *mistake*, Kyle. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time — "

Stan cut short. That was a lie.

"I mean... of course it felt like a big deal. I — fuck. Fuck!" Stan trailed his hands through his own hair, pulling to get himself to concentrate. "It's just — really goddamn frustrating, because I want to have a conversation about this without one of us screaming at the other. I don't want this to turn into the thing that ruined our friendship. I'm not ready to let go of you, Kyle, I'm really not. I care about you too much."

Kyle still wasn't talking to him. He wasn't reacting at all, in fact. He moved numbly, shifting little objects around in his locker like those little actions kept him sane. For all Stan knew, that really *was* what was keeping him sane.

“I never meant to hurt you,” Stan tried, his voice lowering in volume. The first warning bell rang, and he was slowly losing hope. Most everyone else had since abandoned the hallways in favor of their classrooms, and everything felt much too isolated. The longer Kyle ignored him, the more desperate he got. He slowly reached out, once again attempting to make physical contact with Kyle. “Kyle — ”

Just as Stan’s fingertips met Kyle’s shoulder, Kyle spun around, smacking Stan in the chest with a loose, weak fist. It hardly felt like much at all, but the emotions behind the punch still left a chink in Stan’s armor. “*Don’t touch me,*” Kyle hissed, looking up at Stan’s face. Stan frowned, moving to withdraw — but something stopped him short. Maybe it was the way Kyle wasn’t meeting his eyes properly, or maybe it was the way Kyle was shaking. Whatever it was, it kept him sturdy in Kyle’s path like a rock. And, not a moment later, Kyle’s face drained of all color and tension. He stared blankly in front of him. Stan hardly had enough time to prepare for what was inevitable.

“Kyle — oh, *shit* — ! ”

Kyle’s knees buckled, and he collapsed. Stan caught Kyle, shocked at just how heavy — and yet, strangely light — he was. Kyle was a dead weight in his arms. It was all Stan could do to lower Kyle to the ground, keeping careful not to allow him to hit anything on the slow way down.

It was terrifying, to see Kyle limp like that on the floor. Stan’s brain hardly understood what his eyes were seeing, and he had extreme difficulty in processing how to go about addressing the situation. Stan, crouched next to Kyle, gently patted his friend’s cheek. “Kyle,” he said, and swallowed the lump in his throat when he received no response. “Kyle? Hey, can you hear me?”

Stan swore he felt his heart stop when Kyle made a noise and opened his eyes. He was still disoriented, and that was obvious in the way his eyes wandered over everything that caught his attention. Although reluctant, Stan removed his hand from Kyle’s cheek.

“Hey,” Stan whispered. He’d said that word so many times, now, it didn’t sound real. But even so, he said it again. “Hey — can you hear me? Look at me. Look at me, please.”

Kyle did. And as soon as he did, he lifted his hand and weakly tried to shove Stan away from him. Gravity was naturally against him, though, and as soon as his arm fell back to his chest, Kyle recanted. He forced himself to sit up quickly. He would have stood up fully, if Stan hadn’t have stopped him. The back of Kyle’s head made contact with the metal locker behind him, and Stan winced automatically at the sound that resulted. He knew it was only loud because it was hollow, but that didn’t stop him from assuming it had hurt. He needed to bring Kyle to the nurse.

“Jesus, man, are you okay?” Stan asked. Kyle only glared at him through narrow eyes. Stan couldn’t handle the look Kyle was giving him, so he looked around the hallway. It was empty, which was going to make this a whole lot harder. He couldn’t just *leave* Kyle here to get the nurse. He could bring him with, but Kyle didn’t look like he’d be able to stand very efficiently, much less walk. Stan could feel his hands shaking as he tried to think through this situation. He knew one thing for a fact: he needed to get the nurse, because Kyle wasn’t okay.

Stan tried to offer his hands to help Kyle stand, but Kyle immediately pushed him away. He might not be able to stand, but that didn't mean he wasn't able to fight. "Kyle, come on. I'm trying to *help* you."

"Get away from me!"

"*No*," Stan said. The firmness in his voice surprised even himself. "What the hell is with you right now? I need to take you to the nurse."

"I don't wanna fucking talk t'you," Kyle quipped. His words slurred just the slightest bit; it was mild, but still enough for Stan to notice. If he hadn't known better — or, perhaps, if the mood were a little lighter — Stan would have asked if Kyle was tipsy.

Stan chose to ignore what Kyle was saying. "Can you stand?"

"No-no," Kyle mumbled. "You know what, I can't — I can't fucking stand. I can't fucking stand *you*."

Stan gave Kyle a look, but he wasn't sure what the look was supposed to be. He didn't know what he was feeling at this point, other than a frantic fear that told him he needed to take control of this *right now*. "Please work with me," he pleaded. He was trying so hard to get this all to work out, just for a minute. He just needed a minute — just one fucking minute. "Please — "

A firm hand took hold of Stan's shoulder, and for the third time in the past ten minutes, he was faced with Kenny.

"What the hell? Stop sneaking up on me," Stan breathed. Without realizing, he asked, "how are you so good at that?"

But Kenny wasn't having it. He turned his attention to Kyle, who had since curled up on himself, with his forehead resting on his knees, and his legs hugged to his chest. "Enough about me. What's with him?" Kenny asked.

"I don't know. He's acting weird, and he passed out," Stan answered. "He's probably gotten himself sick, or something — I don't know."

Kenny made a face. He reached forward to feel Kyle's face for a temperature. Kyle reacted quickly, slapping at Kenny's hand with both of his own. Kenny recoiled, frowned, and said, "dude, Stan, are you stupid? Take him to the nurse."

"I'm *trying*, but he won't let me touch him. And I couldn't just leave him here alone while I ran to get the nurse — " Stan cut off when Kenny nudged him firmly to the side. When Stan relented and moved over, Kenny took up where Stan had been previously, kneeling in front of Kyle.

"Dude, hey, it's me. Kenny," Kenny said. Stan almost felt a little offended at just how quickly Kyle's attitude changed. He went from a defensive ball of anger to someone actively searching for help and comfort. Kyle reached out, grabbing Kenny's parka in his fists.

“Make Stan leave me alone,” Kyle whispered. His voice was gravelly and cracked; unsure and shaky. “I’ve told him so many times but he — he won’t leave me alone. I can’t be around him. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t — ”

“Okay — okay,” Kenny muttered. He took Kyle’s hands in his own, keeping sturdy and open and willing to help. Stan couldn’t help but feel like he was destroying a bond of trust between the two. He felt like an intruder, taking up space where he wasn’t supposed to be. Without thinking about it, Stan stood, keeping himself steady on unstable legs with the help of the lockers. When Kenny looked at him, he said, “you can go, Stan. I got this.”

Stan’s throat tightened. “Are — ”

“I’m *sure*, Stan. Just go.”

Stan hesitated. His brain tried to come up with an excuse to stay, some reason to keep himself planted next to Kyle. He wanted to be the person Kyle leaned on, he wanted to be Kyle’s rock. He wanted to be the one keeping everything together — but he couldn’t. How could he, when he couldn’t even keep *himself* together?

“Go,” Kenny insisted, and he finally did.

Stan walked away, feeling more useless at that moment than he ever had in his life.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be posted on wednesday (november 14th)!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

A Drunk Man's Words

Chapter Summary

Stan, panicked, tried to redeem himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Stan always thought of himself as a pretty chill guy. He rolled with the punches, and didn't freak out easily. It took a lot for him to outwardly lose his cool, and that had been the one thing he felt a little proud of himself for. He dealt with what was handed to him on his own, most of the time. Sure, the ways he dealt with his bullshit were less than ideal (as was evident by the hangover he'd been sporting since he'd woken up), but the thing that mattered to him was the fact that he didn't bother everyone else with his problems. He was entirely certain that the people around him would rather not be dragged down by the shit going on in his head, and he was fine with that. He'd always had a backup plan.

Panic, while not something totally alien, was still a rather large leap in the emotions he regularly felt. There were moments, in the midst of the numb monotony of day to day life, where he'd sink to his knees in the shower, or crawl into bed, curled up in the fetal position because of that pounding feeling in his chest — but those moments were rare, and he intended to keep it that way.

Unfortunately, his emotional state wasn't one of those things that he could make his bitch. It was an automatic, reflexive reaction to whatever stimulus his brain decided to focus on at the time. It was frustrating, truly.

So, when he saw the empty place next to him in seventh period, he felt almost ashamed, and ridiculously frustrated, at the fact that he felt panicked. It hit hard, at first. It was like a softball to the chest, knocking all of the air out of his lungs and making him lose all knowledge of where he was and why. His instincts told him to get up and look — that seat shouldn't be empty. It had never been empty, not once, and it was scary to realize that Kyle might be doing worse than he originally thought.

That concept felt almost impossible. Kyle had looked like he'd had a really harsh run-in with death himself. He'd fainted, he was shaking, and he was fucking *disoriented*. There was something wrong — there was something so, so incredibly, evidently *wrong* with him — and it made Stan fear for his friend's safety. Stan wondered if he should have said something sooner. He'd certainly *noticed* it sooner — Kyle hadn't looked alright since December, and that was almost a month ago. The dark circles under his eyes had started popping up around New Year's. That had been nothing new, though, right? Kyle always went through bouts of

insomnia. He never faltered from lack of sleep, even if it displayed itself in the way his body looked.

Stan found himself staring intently at Kyle's empty table space, his chin resting in the palm of his hand. His other hand was gripping the end of his sleeve like a lifeline. He wondered what Kyle hadn't been telling him, if anything. He wondered if it was emotional, or physical — if Kyle even realized it was happening. Maybe he'd gotten sick, or maybe it was really just the stress of everything attacking him at once. Stress could lead to lack of sleep and a drop in appetite, right? And, if he was just sleep deprived and dehydrated, that could be what made him pass out. Surely, there was nothing truly wrong with Kyle. Surely, Kyle was healthy. Surely, Kyle was going to be okay.

He tried to convince himself he was overreacting. Kyle was fine, he told himself. Kenny had taken Kyle to the nurse, and the nurse sent Kyle home just to be safe. Maybe he'd take tomorrow off, too, so he could recover from whatever bug he'd caught, or so he could catch up on sleep. His mom would make sure nothing bad happened to him, and if something went wrong, the hospital was less than fifteen minutes away.

Stan's heart throbbed. The idea of Kyle being rushed to the hospital was too much, because — what if he was? What if he had been taken to the hospital, and this was just the tip of the iceberg? What if, what if, what if — and the sensation of impending doom surrounded Stan's entire body. It ripped through the skin on his chest and shoulders like the claws of monsters, making him curl in on himself. He could feel every twitch of his heart inside of his chest. Briefly, he wondered if he was having a heart attack. Logically, he knew he wasn't, but that didn't stop his brain from freaking him out enough to make him *think* he was.

Stan glanced around the classroom, trying to see — trying to... god, dammit, he didn't fucking know. He was just looking, like doing that would make everything okay again. Every other student in the classroom was either paying rapt attention to the teacher's lecture, or was absently scrolling through Twitter and Instagram on their phones. One girl in particular was literally taking a selfie on Snapchat, complete with the wink and the tip of her tongue sticking out. Stan's head told him that this was shit. That everything was shit, that everything was failing, that everything mattered and everything was nothing so nothing mattered and it was all just one big *fucking shitshow*.

Stan drew in a shaky breath, and turned his attention back to the teacher. She had her back turned to the class, and she was writing something rapidly on the board as she spoke. She said something about the function of algae in the ecosystem of lakes and rivers. She spoke about kelp and parasites that made homes on the skin of fish, and it was turning really fast. The world was spinning — was the world spinning? Because he could feel it spinning. Another shaky breath, and Stan found his lungs were unwilling to open up. It felt like his ribs were keeping them prisoner, making him struggle to breathe. It felt so cataclysmic to him, that it shocked him to realize no one else felt the same thing.

He needed to know that Kyle was okay. He needed to *know* that Kyle was *okay*.

Against his better judgment, Stan slowly slipped his hand into his backpack and drew out his phone. He hid it in the folds of his sweater, at first, watching the teacher like a hawk. He knew he shouldn't be doing this. He knew this was a bad idea. Sure, everyone else was on

their phones, and they were all on their phones for very mundane reasons, but Stan... Stan wasn't the type of guy to do this. Hell, half of the time, he forgot his phone even existed. To take out his phone in the middle of class felt like a serious misstep in the strictness of his moral code.

The teacher turned her back to the class again, this time saying something about water. Stan took the chance, and quickly unlocked his phone, his fingers shaking as he hit every number. His eyebrows furrowed when he saw that his phone was already open to Kyle's contact in the texting app.

His heart fell to the floor when he saw that there were messages — dozens of them, as he came to realize — that he distinctly didn't remember sending. He didn't even remember typing them, but they were there.

The craziest thing about it, was that Kyle had actually responded.

Stan was tempted to look through the text conversation he and Kyle had apparently had last night (even though the concept of reading his drunk texts was fucking humiliating), but he managed to push away the urge. He would do that later, when he didn't feel like the world was crushing down on his shoulders. Stan quickly tapped out and sent a message, and then stared at the screen intently as it sent.

KYLE

Today 14:10

dude are you ok? what happened?

Even after it sent, Stan continued to stare at the screen. He was convinced, for some reason, that if he just kept staring at the texts, it'd make Kyle respond faster. Like Kyle knew he was waiting for him, even though that was a fucking stupid thing to think. Stan couldn't help it, though. It was automatic. That didn't stop his heart from picking up in his chest again when he saw those little dots signifying Kyle was typing. It didn't stop his breath from catching when he saw the response Kyle sent him.

KYLE

Today 14:14

Low blood sugar. I'm fine.

Stan responded immediately.

KYLE

where are u? Did you get sent home?

Another minute passed before those dots popped back up again. They bounced for a long time, and Stan got lost in the rhythm. It was simple, and in that way, it was hypnotic. But then the dots disappeared, and Stan's heart skipped a beat in the most frightened way possible. He thought through every single thing he could have said, how he could have been more tactful. Maybe he hadn't seemed caring enough, or maybe he shouldn't have texted at all. Maybe Kyle would have been happier if Stan had just dropped all contact. Surely, Kyle would be happier if Stan just fell off the face of the planet. The dots returned.

KYLE

Today 14:17

No. Stop texting me.

Stan, panicked, tried to redeem himself.

KYLE

ok. I just wanted to make sure you were ok.

He hoped that, maybe, just maybe, Kyle would say something like "never mind, it's okay, I don't want to lose you". He wanted more than anything for everything to be okay again between himself and Kyle. Kyle had been his rock. Kyle had been his constant. They'd always been there for each other, and they'd always had such a strong bond, and Stan couldn't handle the idea of it all —

KYLE

Today 14:20

Whatever.

... being lost.

In that moment, Stan gave up on trying. His head, his heart, his body — all of him was exhausted, and he just... he couldn't handle any more. There was a flood of courage that flushed through his veins, and Stan slowly scrolled up through his message history with Kyle. There were quite a few messages, and it was a lot of himself texting Kyle, rather than Kyle texting him. That was what he'd expected from drunk texts, though. It was rare that he managed to leave behind evidence of his drunken states, but when he did slip up, he slipped up a lot. There were plenty of drunk e-mails floating around in Stan's trash, that he'd ended up sending Kyle in the middle of the night. The idea of being back to where he'd been when he was *twelve*, for fucks sake, was disheartening.

Stan stopped scrolling when he reached Kyle's "Call me" text. It blared into his eyes, giving him a ghost of a feeling that he'd dealt with last night. His ears burned, his chest tightened, his entire self was bombarded with feelings and emotions. He felt — something

indescribable. Something urging him to do things he didn't want to do, but felt like... he needed to.

He'd never really thought of addiction as a feeling. He chalked that up to the logical part of his brain, telling him technically it *wasn't* a feeling. It felt like a feeling, but the doctors and psychologists and teachers always said it was a disease. He remembered distinctly when his father was dealing with the harsh throes of his own addiction, how he'd been rendered useless and victimized. It was annoying, it was frightening, and Stan never forgot the way his father looked in that state. He'd sworn to himself then, at the age of nine, that he wouldn't ever devolve into that. He'd never let himself get that bad. Never, never, never. He'd seen what it had done, he'd seen what it could do, he'd seen what it *would* do.

So, when he hit seventh grade and was in a constant state of buzzed, miserable stupor, he had a disgustingly hard time admitting to himself he had a problem. He knew that every addict had that issue, but — that just went to reaffirm the thing he didn't want to acknowledge. He was an addict. He was twelve years old and he was a fucking alcoholic. He'd spend every waking moment, wondering when he'd next be able to drink. He'd never be able to explain what that did to him. He'd never be able to explain the way it felt when he no longer had control.

Just staring at the first message in his drunken texting-spree was enough to bring all of it flooding back, and it was weird to think that was where his life had ended up going. When he was eight, he'd never have imagined he'd be sitting in his Junior year, single, with a massive rift between himself and Kyle — and a gnawing hunger rooted in a hole that he knew he'd never be able to fill. He told himself he'd be able to drink when he got home (he had nothing left to lose now, did he?), and he began to read the texts from last night, blocking out the rest of the class easily.

KYLE

Yesterday 17:29

kyle

look look look ok I know I know I fucked up. Ok I know
but I swear man I swear I have a reason I didnt just do it for the halibut

*hell of it, jesus christ

Yesterday 17:33

I told you not to text me.

Yesterday 17:34

I know kyle I know trust me I was there I remembr evry vivbly
jejnfkejfnf

im so sorry my hands are shaking lol this is hard im sorry im sorry

but I mean anyway I remember and I just wanted to say im sorry first of all like im rly rly rly
sorry about everything I fucked up so bad I fucked it up

Im good at that I think like if there was a competition at fucking everything up I might win
I like to think maybe my legacy will be that I fucked up so badly and then when I die itll all
come like a monsoon that I was the best at it.

fucking up I mean
Get to the point.
right right right sry
thats my point by the way im sorry im sorry im sorry im sorry

please please dont make me leave you alone kyle lplease
Is that all you have to say?

if it is?
I'm blocking you.

wait wait WAIT WAIT WAIT WAIT

Then stop texting me.

ok. Im sorry.

Read 17:55

Stan's head spun as he finished reading, and everything began to throb around him when he realized there was more. He'd expected that to be it. He had truly, honestly expected that to be all, but it kept going. The shame and embarrassment he was subjecting himself to was torture, but at the same time, he couldn't leave it alone. It was like a drug all its own, looking back at what his brain had wanted to say. And it was scary, knowing there was a point in time where his conscious memory just ceased to exist.

The teacher was still talking. She was going over the test that they were supposed to be preparing for at the end of the week, but Stan wasn't worried. This wasn't his best subject, but he was typically a good test taker. He pushed the conscious thoughts out of his mind, again, and lost himself in the second portion of his and Kyle's conversation.

The time stamp at the top read 18:22.

KYLE

Yesterday 18:22
yknow whats FUNNY

I thought I could keep my parents from breaking up LOL

Yesterday 18:24
What did I say about talking to me, Stan?

I thought if I made my mom think she was losing it she would drop it and everything would be A OKAY But NO

IF ID HAVE JUST TAKN TE CONSQKQNCES OF BEGNI A FJUCKIN STONR LIEK A MAN NON OF THJS WOLD HAV HAPNED

how FUNNYI is THAT

Stan

I didnt even want to put the weed in ur dresser

I wanted to tell you so so so bad LOL

BUT I WAS AFRAID HAHA

U WRE RITE I AM PATHETIC

IS THAT WHT U WANT KYLE? DYU WANT ME TO CALL MUSELF PTHETIC?

IS THAT WHAT ITL TAKE 2 MAKE THINGS OK AGAN?

Don't.

BECUZ ILL FUCKING DOIIT OKAY

ILL CALL MSYELF PATHETIC ILL SPEND MY ENTRE FKKIN LIFE SAYN IM PATHETIC IF IT MENS I MKE IT BETER

IM PATHETIC IMPATHENC IM PATHEDIC IM PADETHIC

Please stop. You're scaring me.

i

im sorry

im sorry I love u ilove u ilov u

Are you drunk?

no

plz

I love you

but duck u kyle I hate u

You're drunk.

ur right. Ur alwaays right.

Go to bed.

You're going to be miserable tomorrow.

I wanna sleep 4 ever. Do u ever wan 2 sleep 4 evvr?

Are you going to be okay on your own?

idk r u

I can call your mom.

nonono pleas dont

Then drink some water and go to bed.

mmmmmkay

Set your alarm, too. The last thing you're going to want is your mom waking you up when you're hungover.

Did you drink any water yet?

yes

Have you set your alarm?

I dont kno how.

help

Fine. I'm coming over.

wait really

wait nnonononono I dont want you tosee me like this

You should have fucking thought of that before you got drunk.

You fucking idiot. You never learn, do you?

Im sorry

Don't. Don't even start.

I'm coming over to make sure you don't do something fucking stupid. That's it.

This doesn't mean I forgive you, and it doesn't mean anything between us is fixed or okay.

Do you understand?

yes

Good. You're lucky I know where you put the spare key. Otherwise you'd be dealing with a broken door.

aw u care

Barely.

"Mr. Marsh?"

Stan startled, instinctively shutting his phone off. He looked up, his breath rushing out of his lungs all at once when he saw the teacher standing right next to him. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she was giving him a thoroughly displeased stare. He was no stranger to that look. He'd been given it plenty of times, though it had died down significantly since he'd been kicked off of the football team.

"I know you're not thrilled with this class," she said, her chin tipped down. Her glasses slid down her nose, and Stan felt distinctly threatened for some reason. "But I'd really appreciate it if you could save the texts for after class."

Stan breathed in deeply, trying to gather the required air to be able to respond. "I — " he began, and found himself startled when he ran out of air so quickly. He brought in a second breath so he could continue. "I wasn't... it's not what you think, I was checking in on Kyle — "

"Nice try, Stan," she cut him off. She uncrossed her arms and held out her hand expectantly. Stan swallowed, and just looked at her, pretending not to know what she wanted. She didn't buy it, nor did she allow his charade to linger for any longer than a few seconds. "Well? Hand it over. You'll get it back after class."

Reluctantly, Stan handed his phone over to the teacher. She gave him a little nod, and said a "thank you" that reminded him of the way adults did when they didn't *really* mean it. She walked to the front of the class and deposited his phone in a small plastic basket (which she'd creatively dubbed the "phone hotel"). He could feel everyone staring at him, and the stress of being watched by twenty pairs of eyes made his skin crawl. He wanted to disappear, and he tucked himself deeper into his sweatshirt so he could try. He observed shyly as the teacher continued with her lecture on what they should expect to be asked on their test. He wasn't listening, though. Not really. He was too caught up in what he'd just read, and how he'd

managed to block all of that out. Stan remembered none of it. Literally, none of it — and it scared him that he'd lost all of his control so quickly. It didn't make any sense to him. There was no way he could have gotten black out drunk *that* fast. Right? There was no way.

The bell for the end of school rang twenty minutes later, and Stan was left blearily trying to stave off a headache that had been building since he'd handed over his phone. The pain medication he'd taken that morning had disappeared all at once, it seemed, and with no distractions other than an abysmally boring class, he was left scrabbling for an inkling of relief. There was an area behind his eyes that throbbed, and that area connected to a place just at the base of his neck. Everything was sore.

He'd forgotten the bell had rung completely, and the only reason he was reminded of that fact was because the teacher approached him. He heard her approaching more than he saw her, half blinded by his focus on the ache. She said something to him, but he couldn't really make it out over the sound of blood rushing through his ears. She set his phone in front of him on the desk, and then walked away. Stan drew in a deep breath, and dug through his backpack without thinking about it.

He kept a bottle of Aspirin at the bottom of his bag. It'd been a habit to stuff it in ever since he'd started drinking. Eventually, he'd just left it in. He'd started getting headaches and migraines for no reason in freshman year, anyway. They'd tapered off that summer, but he never found a reason to take out the bottle of Aspirin. Admittedly, he'd totally forgotten it was in there. His hands were the ones who remembered, and they moved easily to take out the pills.

He didn't have any water with him at the moment, so he ended up swallowing his dose dry. It sucked pretty hardcore, but it was a hell of a lot better than dealing with the throbbing that was shaking his brain. He knew it was just psychosomatic, but he felt better as soon as he swallowed it. He knew it hadn't kicked in, not really. But, that didn't stop him from taking advantage of the minimal relief. He shoved everything back into his backpack with the kick of energy it gave him, and he tucked his chair under the table. The teacher said goodbye to him as he left her classroom, but he didn't reply.

His hands were shaking as he carried himself down the hallways. The headache was pushed to the side, and that disgusting, miserable loss of control began to ebb its way back into his flesh. There was one thing he wanted, and one thing only. He wanted a drink.

And he wanted to lose it all. He wanted to be reckless. He wanted to have fun, and say “fuck you” to the world. He wanted to live a little, breathe a little, be a little. He wanted so much, and it all wrapped him up neatly like a present. He supposed, in some fucked up way, it was a present. Sure, he'd lost everything, but that just meant he had nothing left to lose. An apathy strung itself through his heart and lungs, and threaded dangerously through his stomach. He cared about nothing.

He felt free.

His feet took him to the back of the school. It was a weird place for his feet to take him, really; he'd never hung out there. He didn't like it there. It smelled like cigarette smoke and chlorine, which just reminded him of going to a public pool. He squirmed out of the back

door — which didn't open all the way, even on good days — and found himself completely unsurprised when he saw three dumpsters to his left. They covered up a little alcove, which students hid in. There used to be a group of juniors and seniors that got stoned back there, but they'd since graduated. None of the freshman had discovered this place, and all of the graffiti was years old.

Stan wormed himself behind the dumpsters, and was soon in the alcove with minimal issue. He latched onto the chain fence to his right. It smelled like pot back there, and he had to hold himself back from bringing his shirt over his nose to protect himself from the stench.

“What do you want, Marsh?”

The nasal voice broke through the stiff silence in the alcove, and it made Stan instinctively want to flee. Craig didn't make himself out to be threatening, nor did he sound like he was particularly pissed off, but Stan knew. He figured it probably had something to do with the fact that Tweek was sitting in Craig's lap in the far corner. If Tweek's unzipped jeans were anything to go by, Stan figured they were probably more keen on being left alone.

Stan swallowed, examining the scene before him with no outward expression. None that he could feel on his face, at least. He was intruding, probably, but he didn't really give two shits, nor a flying fuck.

“Fine,” was all Stan said.

Tweek rolled his head back, craning to see Stan better. He was fidgeting with the strings of Craig's hoodie — the base of which was covered in fur of some kind. He didn't think Craig had a dog, so he figured it must be guinea pig hair. If guinea pigs even shed that much. Craig shifted his own head, though his movement was significantly less noticeable. He tipped it to the side. He was looking at Stan up and down, like he was gaging him for some vitally important personal information. Finally, Craig asked, “fine what?”

“To your question,” Stan answered. He fought the urge to shift his weight, and fought the urge to look uncertain. Stan dropped his backpack to the ground, and rolled up his sleeves, like he was meant to be there. He was here for a reason, and he would not leave until he got that reason. “Y'know, the one that you were so keen on getting me to agree to? The one that you approached me in the first place for?”

Craig's eyes gained a depth, like he suddenly understood very well what Stan was talking about. Which was good, since Stan wasn't sure how much of Craig's business Tweek knew about. He didn't want to be the one to let him in on it. Stan gave a wary glance at Tweek, and he tried to keep his eyes away from the guy's fly. It was still down, for goodness' sake. Sure, his underwear kept anything from showing, but that didn't mean Stan was all that interested in knowing Tweek's choice of the day was pink and purple galaxy briefs.

“Well, I'm here,” Stan continued. “And I'm agreeing. You got me. Now, are we gonna do this thing, or not?”

There was a pause before anything moved. But when everything *did* move, it felt official and contractual. Craig withdrew his hands from under Tweek's shirt — which threw Stan for a bit

of a loop, because he hadn't actually realized Craig's hands *were* under Tweek's shirt — and he finally zipped up Tweek's pants. Craig patted Tweek's thigh, and through some unspoken bond between them, Tweek scooted off of Craig's lap. He grabbed the black messenger bag — which had been settled a few feet down the wall they sat against — and handed it to Craig, who took it gratefully.

“Thanks, babe,” Craig stated. Tweek made a quiet grunting noise, which didn't really sound like it meant much, but apparently it did, because Craig smiled. Stan never thought he'd see the day.

But then Craig was looking at him, and the smile was gone. His expression was replaced with an aloof, sinister blankness. He nodded towards Stan.

“You finally came around. Sweet,” said Craig. His fingers worked on the buckles of the black messenger bag. Then, calmly and without looking up, he added, “take a seat.”

Chapter End Notes

next update will be posted on wednesday (november 21st)!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Pop and Mints

Chapter Summary

What was stopping him from getting up and walking out?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“So, what got you to change your mind, Marsh?”

Stan glanced up from the bag, the contents of which had been carefully taken out and sorted on the uneven, dirty ground. There was a pile of notebooks to the far right, which blocked off the view of the relatively hefty drug selection from through the fence. Those who peeked would see only regular homework bullshit — not that anyone peeked, anyway. This area of South Park had become pretty vacant in the past few years. Additionally, Tweek was hanging around the fence, shielding the operation with his body. Obviously, he knew about Craig’s shit, and he knew about it well.

Craig wasn’t looking at him, Stan noticed, and he honestly wasn’t really sure how to feel about that. Maybe it was just a Craig thing, to talk without making eye contact, or maybe it was a Stan thing. That sentiment could go two ways, however; either Craig was comfortable enough to talk without looking, or he was too uncomfortable to make things personal by going the extra mile. Unfortunately, he was one of those people that Stan doubted he’d ever understand. Stan wasn’t bothered by that in the slightest.

Stan returned his gaze to the assorted packages. They were disguised in a way that was so stupid, it was almost clever. There was stuff hidden inside of old textbooks that the school had stopped using almost five years ago. Craig’s lunch box wasn’t full of lunch items; it was full of bags of pills and tabs. Stan didn’t know what was inside of the thermos, but he wasn’t exactly sure if he wanted to know. To be safe, he didn’t ask. “I got nothing to lose,” Stan finally replied, coughing into his elbow. The cold air was getting to his lungs, but it was nothing he couldn’t handle.

Everything was silent. Wary of it, Stan glanced back up at Craig, trying to see if he could figure out what was going on in the guy’s mind. Were cogs turning; was he thinking? Was he distracted by his boyfriend? Stan almost was surprised when he saw none of those things seemed to be true. Instead of looking contemplative, or staring off at the drugs with a dumb look of concentration, Craig was looking at him. He was finally *looking* at him. Their eyes met, and they held each other’s gaze for an extremely awkward minute. There was something tight and skeptical in Craig’s expression. “You got nothing to lose,” Craig repeated Stan’s words.

Stan realized how that could have sounded when taken out of context, and he quickly backpedaled. He snorted, the air coming out of his nose in an anxious huff. “It was a joke,” he said automatically, rubbing his hands together casually. “Chill out.”

“He’s bullshitting,” piped up Tweek from the corner. Stan looked over. Tweek stood, his back pressed to the chain link fence, with his arms crossed over his chest. He looked uncharacteristically calm and nonchalant. There were no tics, there was no twitch — and there was no yelping. “What do you mean you don’t have anything to lose, man?”

“Is this a ‘you only live once’ type of thing, or an ‘I don’t care anymore’ type of thing?” Craig asked. He sniffed, then, rubbing his nose with his sleeve. Stan wondered if he had a cold, or if he was just plain cold.

“You’re not planning on doing something stupid, are you?” Tweek added.

Just like that, Craig continued, “I might not like you very much, but that doesn’t mean I wanna see you in a casket.”

Jesus Christ. They’re like a tag-team.

“Guys, come on. I didn’t come here to be interrogated,” Stan said. He raised his hands up in surrender. The looks both of them were sporting were giving him a distressed feeling, and it gnawed uncomfortably inside of his ribs. Tweek looked accusing, but Craig looked firmly blank. Suddenly, Craig leaned back, straightening his spine. A few gentle pops were audible as he shifted his position; his eyes never left Stan.

“The relationship between a buyer and his dealer is close,” Craig stated. “I’m like a therapist, but a whole hell of a lot cheaper. So, whether you like it or not, we’re gonna be bros from now on. A part of being bros, means me making sure you aren’t about to sabotage my reputation by overdosing on your first run around the block.”

“Sounds like you’re just watching your own ass, to me,” replied Stan.

“That, too.”

“Great.” Stan slouched over, consciously deciding not to look at Craig anymore. He still caught Tweek’s expression out of the corner of his gaze, which made his blood run cold enough. He didn’t need the stress of being all buddy-buddy with Craig, too. “Now that *that’s* cleared up…”

“Ah-ah,” Craig grunted sharply. Stan startled when Craig snapped his fingers in his face. It gained his attention successfully, however, and that seemed to be the only thing Craig cared about in that region of interaction. “Not so fast. You haven’t answered any of our questions.”

“You’re a master deflector,” Tweek commented from the sidelines. As soon as Stan looked up at him, Tweek turned his gaze towards Craig. “He’s a master deflector. I don’t like that. I don’t like that one bit.”

“I got it, babe,” said Craig. His eyes still never left Stan, and the longer Craig looked at him, the more uncomfortable he became. He fought the urge to squirm under his gaze. “Well? Spill. I’m not selling unless you’re telling.”

Stan was reluctant. The last thing he expected to have to do was talk about himself. He wanted drugs. He didn’t want to relive all of his bullshit by talking to the guy who was supposed to be selling him potentially life-ruining substances. Absently, Stan wondered if that was Craig’s plan. Maybe Craig wanted to dig up all the trauma he could, just to make Stan feel like he’d need more than he really did. He wouldn’t lie, it was kind of a smart strategy, if not a bit risky. What was stopping him from getting up and walking out? He could find what he wanted elsewhere, easily. Sure, it’d probably be a whole hell of a lot more dangerous — but why not live a little, right? That’s what he was doing here in the first place.

Stan decided just to talk to Craig.

“I just want an out for a little bit, okay? I’m not planning on killing myself, or overdosing, or whatever. Literally all I want is to *not* be in my own head for a few hours.” Stan shrugged his shoulders loosely. Doing so was an extremely difficult effort, and it made his back hurt.

Something in Craig’s eyes twinkled; a mischievous light sparked. “You realize a high *is* being inside your own head?”

Stan rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

He heard Craig breathe heavily outward, and Stan figured that would be the closest he’d ever get to hearing Craig laugh. It wasn’t something he was too focused on, though; he just wanted this to be over with. His ass was starting to hurt from where he’d been sitting, and he was pretty sure there was a piece of plastic under his left leg, but he didn’t give a damn. He could deal with the sharp bite of plastic. He did, however, adjust so he was sitting with his legs crossed, rather than with his legs straight out in front of him. It was easier that way, and he shifted his body in a turn. Now that he’d adjusted to sit more comfortably (crisscross applesauce, he mused silently), he could face the makeshift drug market with little issue. With a sigh, Stan leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

Stan caught a glimpse of something bright pink and incredibly girlish. It was hidden underneath one of the more opaque baggies of pills. Curious, he reached forward and moved the bag to the side to see the pink thing better. To his surprise, it was a notebook; a very small, very thick notebook, with a lock on the side and a gray cat on the cover. “Um,” he said, tracing his finger over one of the sparkled designs on the little lock-and-key diary. “What’s this got?”

“Coke,” said Craig. “You want a line?”

Stan’s eyes widened significantly. He withdrew his hand, no longer comfortable with touching it. That... wasn’t what he was expecting. At all. He felt like he should have expected something as shocking as that to come out of the mouth of someone like Craig, but he hadn’t been prepared in the slightest. “Seriously?” he choked, gazing at the unsuspecting, innocent cat.

“No,” Craig answered.

Stan breathed a sigh of relief.

“You gotta pay before you get a line,” continued Craig. Stan choked on the air coming in through his throat again.

“Jesus, man, you’re gonna kill him at this rate,” said Tweek. He adjusted his position against the fence, turning his face off to stare towards the entryway of the alcove. “Stop messing with him. I don’t want to deal with a dead body.”

“Wait, I’m confused,” Stan said meekly. “Is there cocaine in there, or are you shitting me?”

Craig didn’t say anything. He just picked up the diary and fiddled with the lock until it came free from the ribbon that kept it on — it was now that Stan realized the lock was in the shape of a heart — and he opened the cover. Craig flipped through the pages, and soon enough, there was a little compartment peaking out from the rest of the diary. The pages seemed to be glued together from that point on, and the center of the pages had been cut out with (what Stan could only *assume* was) a razor blade. It was messy, but it got the job done. It vaguely reminded Stan of something he’d seen in a movie, once. Curious, Stan watched as Craig withdrew a little paper package. His breath caught, fully expecting it to be coke —

“Mentos,” said Craig. He unfurled the worn packaging, shook a mint into his hand, and popped it into his mouth. Stan watched incredulously. Craig offered him the pack, but Stan shook his head. Craig replaced the Mentos, re-laced the ribbon through the lock, and tucked the diary into his messenger bag. Then, he leaned back, his posture slouching against the brick wall behind him. “So, what kind of high are you looking for?”

“Umm...” Stan trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck with a hesitant hand. He could feel just how unstable his fingers were as he trailed them through the back portion of his hair. He wondered if he should really be doing this. Would he end up regretting this? The possibility was mild, and it left only a tiny aching feeling of apprehension in his stomach, but he otherwise pushed it to the side. No. Of course he wouldn’t end up regretting this. Craig was probably the most trustworthy drug dealer Stan knew (granted, Craig was the *only* drug dealer Stan knew). Why should he be wary of this? He slowly began to respond, picking at the loose gravel and wayward wood chips that layered the ground. “I don’t know. What... uh, would you recommend?”

Craig snorted, which made Stan feel self-conscious. “What would I recommend? Wow, you really are new to this,” said Craig. Stan was tempted to butt in at that remark. He wasn’t planning on arguing with Craig for the sake of prolonging his dignity, or whatever; Stan just wanted to defend himself. Ultimately, he forced himself to stay quiet just to keep his sanity, if nothing else. Some kids ran past the fence that Tweek was guarding, but neither Craig nor Tweek moved a muscle. Stan was unnerved. Craig cracked his knuckles. “This isn’t some high-end restaurant in Fairplay. You can’t just ask me my opinion on what tastes good.”

“Is that what you’d do?” Stan asked. When Craig didn’t move, he continued, “like, you’d tell me what tastes good, instead of what would get me the high I want?”

“If I wanted to sell people good-tasting shit, I’d be selling my dick,” Craig replied. Stan opened his mouth to respond, but then closed it quickly. He knew he probably resembled a fish in that moment, but he couldn’t exactly find it within himself to care very much. He was a little preoccupied with the fact that Craig was so confident in the flavor of his dick. The thought crossed his mind that, maybe Craig *knew* what his own dick tasted like, for some reason? And... that was not a train of thought Stan wanted to go down, oh boy. Even so, he found himself suddenly getting caught up in the logistics of such a thing. How would that even *work*? Stan involuntarily turned to look at Tweek, who stared at him in return.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?” Tweek questioned. He crossed his arms even tighter over his chest. To Stan, it looked like Tweek had suddenly become significantly more conscious of his surroundings. It was weird, seeing the way the normally anxious spaz of a guy slowly slipped back into *being* his normal, anxious spaz of a guy personality. He knew the only reason it was jarring was because he’d been so chill for the entire time Stan had been here. There was a twitch in the muscles of Tweek’s shoulders as he hunched in on himself. “Craig, why is he *looking* at me like that?”

“Don’t worry about it, honey,” was all Craig responded with. Another sniff came from Craig, and that was enough to bring Stan back to the deal he was supposed to be making at that moment. Craig had picked up a small book — one that was not pink, nor did it have any cats — and was flipping through the pages calmly. Initially, Stan had thought it to be a notebook, but that theory was quickly proved wrong when he saw there were actual, computer-printed words on each page. It was a book. Like, a fiction book. Something that, according to the blue cover, seemed like it might be sci-fi. Craig unceremoniously shoved his hand into his backpack, to which he withdrew a pencil. Much to Stan’s surprise, Craig began to write in the book. Stan made a face, but said nothing. Craig was still marking the page he’d flipped to by the time he resumed talking. “The answer is no, by the way. But I also wouldn’t tell you what’ll give you the high you want, because I don’t know what type of high you want. So, you’re going to need to tell me what kind of high you want.”

Stan turned his gaze down towards the collection of drug-holding paraphernalia before him. Bags and jars and a plastic coffee cup from Harbucks stared back at him. It was a pretty good question, he would admit. The truth was, he didn’t know what type of high he wanted. He didn’t know what type of high he could *have*. He knew the basics; shrooms would make him hallucinate, LSD would make him open to the universe or something, and heroin makes you... err, sleepy? Holy shit, he wasn’t prepared for this *at all*. “I don’t know,” Stan muttered for what felt like the umpteenth time. He knew his indecisiveness must have been annoying, so he tried to help out by being as honest and specific as possible, even though he didn’t have a clue on where to start. “I just — want to feel good. Like, get out of my mind. I mean, I want to be *in* my head, but I want my head to not be *my* head, y’know?”

Craig only quirked a brow. Stan swallowed down the tightness in his throat and continued.

“I want to... um, feel happy? And, like, not think everything is bullshit. I want things to not be dull and shitty. I want to feel things. I don’t know how to get more specific than that.”

“Oh,” Craig grunted. He grabbed one of the bags from the pile. Inside were small, colorful blobs. Upon closer inspection, Stan noticed that they looked a little like hard candies. Craig

shook the bag gently, like he was trying to draw Stan's attention to it, even though Stan was already staring quite intently at the contents. "You want Methylenedioxymethamphetamine?"

Stan gave Craig a *what the fuck did you just say to me?* look.

"MDMA," Craig stated, like that was supposed to ring a bell in Stan's head. When that didn't work, he said a little more insistently, "*ecstasy*."

"Right." Stan straightened his posture up without really thinking about it. In a way, he supposed his body was trying to make up for what his brain was lacking in knowledge. His spine said *I totally knew that*, but his brain refused to let his spine get away with lying like that. He was back to slouching again quickly, which he knew he'd get shit for from Kyle and his parents, but he didn't care. Just thinking about them made his resolve strengthen. "What's it do?"

"It makes you feel really good," Craig replied. "Like, *really* good. Because, y'know. Ecstasy."

"You don't want that stuff," Tweek interjected. Stan looked over, but Craig didn't react one way or the other. Tweek was picking at a small, black stain on the outside of his sleeve, his arm turned and held out so he could reach it. "Seriously, you don't. The come-up is shit, and you only feel good for a couple of hours. Time feels all sped up, too, which just makes it feel like less."

"Babe, you're scaring off the customers," Craig hummed, his tone relaxed. "It's bad for business."

"He deserves to know the good *and* the bad, Craig!" Tweek's voice lilted, and suddenly he was standing upright. His posture was stiff; his hands dangled loosely at his sides. Tweek looked at Stan, directly addressing him. "Some people throw up in the beginning. Some people get really fucking anxious during the come-up. Sometimes, the anxiety *doesn't go away* — and god forbid you crash."

"Whoa, hold on," said Stan, looking between the couple with a slightly paranoid expression. "What's this about a crash?"

"Ha!" Tweek was beginning to tap his fingers against his thigh; Stan could tell he was slowly regaining his usual distress. "The crash is fucked, man. It's so fucked. I mean, Jesus, dude. You think you're depressed now? You have no idea. You have *no idea*."

Stan could feel himself starting to grow defensive again. He'd never said he was depressed. As far as he was concerned, he hadn't even hinted at the possibility of him being depressed. Why would Tweek think that?

"Babe," came Craig's voice, parting through the air. Tweek twitched — the first twitch Stan had seen from him since yesterday — and stared at Craig. "This is his first time. The odds of him totally crashing aren't massive."

"They're still odds!" argued Tweek. "It's not rare to crash your first time."

“Everyone reacts differently. You had a bad experience, I know, but he might not.”

Stan decided it was about time he interrupted this conversation before it evolved into something more intense. “Okay, maybe we should stick a pin in the Ecstasy for now,” he said. He rubbed his palms over his knees, trying to soothe the nerves that were beginning to make him feel nauseous. It helped, but only slightly. He drew in soft breaths as Craig set the bag of Ecstasy aside.

“Okay. Pin stuck in the E.” Craig ruffled through a few different bags (one of which Stan was almost eerily certain was *literally* cocaine), before coming up with one that seemed to satisfy him. Craig tossed the extra bags aside, holding the one he’d chosen out for Stan to look at. It was full of little, white tabs.

Stan examined it curiously from afar; he only looked at Craig when he began to talk again.

“This is lysergic acid diethylamide, but you probably know it as LSD,” Craig explained. He folded up the bag and rested it on his knee. “It’s not physically addictive, and no one has ever died from overdosing on LSD, when it’s real LSD. And I promise you, this is real LSD. I test it myself.”

Surprised, Stan asked, “you regularly take LSD?”

“No, dumbass, I *test* it. With a drug testing kit. I make sure no one’s fucking me over with any NBOMe bullshit.” The words were harsh and rough as Craig said them, which was new for Stan. He’d never seen Craig get worked up over something before — even when they’d inadvertently brought him to Peru and they got attacked by a guinea pig pirate. Even now, it was slight, but it was there. For the sake of keeping things moderately civil, Stan decided not to ask questions. He’d research, if need be.

Craig breathed out hard through his nose, his nostrils flaring. He tucked his head down, and studied the bag of LSD. He almost appeared bored. Since Craig wasn’t talking, Stan figured it was only polite to break the silence. He cleared his throat before asking, “so... there’s no crash with LSD?”

And then, Craig heaved a sigh. “Look,” he said, scooping up the plastic baggie. “A big part in highs is mental attitude. If your outlook on life is shitty when you take a drug like LSD or MDMA, you’re probably gonna have a shitty time. But if you prepare, and if you understand the effects of what can happen before it *does* happen, your chances of a good experience increase significantly. That make sense?”

Stan nodded.

“Good.” Craig opened the sci-fi book again (which Stan had hardly even realized he’d closed and set aside), and took out his pencil. He began to note some more things in the book.

“Based on the crappy information you gave me, I think your best bet is LSD. It can be intense, but I think you can handle it. If you’re careful and don’t take too much, you should be perfectly fine. Hell, it might give you a breakthrough with whatever issues you’re wrestling right now.”

After making one more mark on the book, Craig hooked his pencil onto the page to save his place. He didn't look up once as he nabbed a slightly larger bag from the pile of drugs still laying on the ground. This bag was full of much smaller bags; it was exactly the type of bag Stan expected to see drugs dealt in. Little, rectangular, and easily able to fit into the palm of someone's hand.

"I'm going to give you two of these," Craig stated. He opened the little drug bag, and then opened the bag of LSD. He put two of the little tabs into the smaller bag, pressed all of the air out, and zipped it up. Craig resealed the bag full of his LSD stock, and then began to pack up the rest of the bags. He left Stan's bag on top of the book, which rested, stable, on his knee. When everything was packed up, Craig looked at Stan, his expression back to being totally unreadable. "That'll be a grand."

Stan's lungs rejected the price before his brain could catch up. He sputtered, coughing like he'd swallowed water and it had gone down the wrong way. When he finally regained control of his respiratory system, Craig's eyes had darkened in amusement.

"Gets 'em every time," Craig said. He rubbed at the bridge of his nose with the side of his index finger; the action was so minuscule, Stan wondered if it was a conscious thing. "No, but seriously, though. It'll be, like, a hundred bucks."

"Oh. Uh..." Stan shifted, digging into his backpack to find where he'd put his money. What he pulled out was chump change compared to the amount he needed, but it was a start. Maybe, if he was lucky, he could negotiate with Craig on pricing. Maybe he could pay it back incrementally over the rest of the semester. All of those thoughts raced through his head, yet he continued to stare dejectedly at the money in his hand. "How about, um... eleven fifty, and some Aspirin?"

Craig was wholly not amused. "Funny," he said. "Where's the other eighty-eight fifty?"

"It's, uh... in my other pants?"

"You didn't even pull that shit out of the pair you're wearing." Craig blinked slowly; he appeared tired. As if on cue, he yawned, pressing the back of his hand over his mouth. "You don't have the money, do you."

"Well — no, I didn't exactly plan on buying LSD today," Stan confessed. He shoved the eleven dollars and fifty cents back into his backpack, but held onto the Aspirin. He might need another one, after this ordeal. "But I can get it."

Craig grunted.

"Don't you drug dealers, like, give out free samples?" Stan asked. He wasn't even sure what he was trying to do, but he doubted it would work.

"Street dealers do that sometimes, with things like coke and heroin. You know why they do that?"

Stan remained silent.

“So they can get you hooked,” Craig said. “It’s a smart business strategy, but it’s shitty. Hard drugs are shitty. I’m not about to supply some dickhead’s meth habit.”

Stan thought he noticed Tweek stiffen out of the corner of his eye. He glanced over, but when he did, he saw that Tweek didn’t look tense at all. He looked like he’d fallen back into the lull of an abnormal calm.

“Hey,” Craig’s voice dropped low. “Don’t look at my boyfriend when I say that, you dick.”

“Right — right. Sorry.”

“Anyway. My point is, I don’t sell hardcore shit. I leave that to the psychopaths on the streets.” Craig opened the book and tucked Stan’s packet of LSD in the middle of it like a bookmark — but, it was a crappy bookmark. It was so far down, Stan couldn’t see where he’d marked the book. He doubted Craig could, either. He also doubted that Craig’s intention was to mark the page. “Also, my point is, get me the money. I’ll hold onto your order for a week. *One* week. After that, you’ve lost the deal, and any purchases you make will be on hold for a month.”

Stan couldn’t help but feel that was a shit business move, but he didn’t know if he wanted to try and argue. He slept his way through economics, most of the time. It was a miracle that he managed to support an extremely half-assed A-. “So, what? I either buy shit from you by next Wednesday, or I’m blocked from your services? Maybe *that’s* what’s scaring away your customers.”

“If you want the drugs, you’ll get the money,” Craig commented. “If you don’t, you won’t, and you’ll probably still be squeaky clean by the end of the year.”

“How do you know that?”

All Craig said was, “trust me. I know.” And that was that. Craig tucked the book carefully into one of the inner pockets of his black messenger bag, and checked around for any leftover evidence of their transactions. Or, more accurately, lack thereof. Craig pushed himself up from the ground and hoisted the bag over his head, where it settled comfortably around his other shoulder. He glanced back at Tweek, who had taken a particular interest in a boxelder bug that was crawling along the edge of the fence. Stan stood up, and as he did, he noticed that Craig was watching Tweek with a tender fondness. It was kind of sweet, but also really gay.

Stan looked away. He zipped up his backpack, and pocketed the little bottle of Aspirin. He slipped his arms through the straps of his bag and turned. He was out of there. He’d had enough of that sort of thing for the night. Stan was entirely ready to head home, cocoon himself comfortably in his blankets, and *maybe* finish off that bottle of whiskey (he didn’t have anything else to lose, he reminded himself; besides, he’d already fucked up his sobriety. Who fucking cares if he just... didn’t bother, for a little while?).

Stan stopped abruptly when he felt a hand on his shoulder. When he turned, he came face to face with Craig.

“Hey,” Craig said in this soft, gravelly tone that probably meant he was being serious. Honestly, Stan couldn’t tell. All of his tones sounded the same. “Don’t just take my word for it. Do some research on this shit, Stan. ”

In all of their interactions with each other over the past week, that was the first time Craig said Stan’s first name. Stan wouldn’t say he was worried, or anything; he honestly doubted Craig was capable of worrying for anyone who wasn’t in his immediate circle. But there was definitely something in that tone of his. For the life of him, Stan couldn’t place it.

“I will,” Stan assured him.

Chapter End Notes

DISCLAIMER: i do not condone the recreational use of legal or illegal psychoactive substances! but if you drink or get high, be safe about it!

((prolly should have put that at the beginning of the story, but its too late now, lol))

next update will be posted on sunday (November 25th!)

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

The Mountains

Chapter Summary

It was long enough for his mother to come in and see.

Chapter Notes

CONTENT WARNING for self-harm and all the nasty stuff that goes with it

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The cold nipped at the tip of his nose and shaved the sides of his cheeks. It cut through his jacket more efficiently than any blade he'd ever used. There were so many wishes in his mind, that they each suffocated each other. He held his head down against the beating, brutal winter wind. Trails of snow followed him down the path he'd become numb to witnessing, creaking and crunching beneath his every footfall. He didn't know what time it was, but there was no passing thought that asked him to check his phone.

Stan's pace slowed as he came to the tiny uphill path he had to take to get home. Usually, he could finish the walk in fifteen minutes, when he was alone; today was different. Today was cold, and his brain was suppressed, and his lungs were cracking themselves into tiny metal boxes that corralled his breath into such small collections. Not even halfway up the hill, he began to wheeze. He squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel his lips beginning to crack from the dryness in the air, and they felt numb just around the places his tongue could reach without strain.

He held something animal back behind a fence. It threatened to escape through a hole that had been worn into the sides with time, but Stan refused to let the wall shatter down. He blocked it with the visions of South Park. He opened his eyes. He needed to squint against the cold, but that was a small price to pay for his interior repression. He saw the mountains in the background — they were always there, always just around the corner. The tops were white and high, standing tall against all odds. They were arguably one of the most powerful versions of Earth's natural walls. They shed avalanches and cascades of rocks when provoked, but remained even still. Stan felt envy; of the mountains, of their strength, of their...

God, when had the temperature fallen so fucking low? He'd been able to sit behind the school without much more than a jacket just twenty minutes ago. What had changed? What had *changed*?

Two steps away from his front door, he was almost certain he was going to need his inhaler. His lungs were pained now, showering his chest in an ache that refused to stop flattening his heart against his rib cage. He couldn't feel the tips of his fingers, nor could he feel the end of his nose. His ears ached almost as much as his chest, and he had a hard time with unlocking the front door. Finally, after much struggling, he burst inside, sucking in breaths in rapid succession, trying to get his lungs to do their one *fucking* job just *breathe* just *breathe breathe goddammit breathe* —

Stan's lungs relaxed. His trachea allowed him to take in air. He leaned against the door. It shut with a loud clatter, giving him reason to be happy with the fact that he was home alone. He messily withdrew his phone, slinging his rucksack from over his shoulder in the process. The time read 4:20, and he almost laughed at the irony. The cruel, unusual punishment of his disgusting, self-induced ironic downfall. His hair was cold as he carded his fingers through it, separating the strands and righting the mess he'd once cared about keeping well-kempt.

Something inside of his mind urged his mentality to relax, but he refused to let it persuade him into anything. He shook his head violently side to side, until he made himself dizzy. He told himself *no*, he told himself *stop*, he told himself *forget*. His legs shook underneath him, barely holding him up. The warmth of the house was starting to thaw his cold feet and hands; it made his shoulders shake. Without caring about his surroundings, Stan dropped his backpack onto the floor and gripped his phone so tightly in his hand, it turned off. He must have pressed the button. He must have hit the button.

Stan did not lock the door. He pushed himself off of it, and bolted up the steps. The entire place was covered in unintentional reminders; each item was something he'd seen while buried in his back-up plan. He stumbled near the top, but payed that no mind. He was desperate.

He tore into his room. In a matter of seconds, his phone was abandoned somewhere on the floor (amid the piles of clothing he had yet to pick up), his jacket was tossed on the edge of his bed, and he was ripping his closet doors open. His fingernails scratched against the wood grain, and he almost gave himself a splinter, but he didn't care. He didn't *care*.

He almost tore holes into the bundle of his old superhero outfit. It wasn't nearly as neat as it had been when he'd first hidden it four years ago. That's to be expected though, isn't it? He'd pulled it out almost equally as desperately last night, horrified by his own actions and terrified by his whims. Something weird made his heart drop. It was hard to explain — almost impossible, if trying to help someone who'd never known it understand. It was a sinking — this horrible, awful, atrocious collapsing of his everything.

Because —

Because the outfit, that he'd used as a hiding place for his whiskey, for so many years —

Was soft.

He unfolded each article of clothing, and searched it thoroughly like he'd be able to find it if he just pulled the *one string that was out of place*. That string would be his savior, that hiding

place would be so normal and he'd be okay. He'd be okay, he'd be okay, and everything around him would be okay, if he could just find it — just find the *fucking string*...

There was no bottle. It was not where he'd left it. The memory he'd been blinded by earlier, as he was walking home, had let him down. It must have been false, then. It must have been false, because he remembered. After an entire day of *not remembering*, he'd *remembered*. He drank almost everything in the bottle, and then he'd shoved it haphazardly back into his clever, sneaky, sordid little hiding place. He didn't know what possessed him to do so; he'd been tipsy, at the least. But he'd had some left. He'd had some *left* and if he could just *find it if he could just find it oh please god let it be here please please please please pleasepleaseplease* —

Stan's fingers found paper among the cloth of the shirt. It was creased and folded and beaten up, like it had seen days of wear and tear, but he knew better. It was a bright orange sticky note, and scribbled in Kyle's half-cursive half-print writing was one thing, and one thing only.

you are better than this.

Not a moment later, his fingers felt the loose, flexible plastic of a bag. It was the same type of bag his mom would use to pack strawberries or carrots in for his lunch. It brought him back to happier times, in happier places when he was happier. But then he saw the contents of the bag. He saw the bright orange pill bottle, labeled with his surname: **MARSH**. And, he saw the bits and pieces and remnants and crushed substance of leaves and twigs and plant and weed *weed weed it was weed it was the fucking weed*.

He wanted a drink, he wanted a drink, he wanted a drink so bad. Everything stretched out so long in front of him, everything wavered in the corners and spread like wings. It felt impossible; all of it was ridiculous, all of it was hopeless, all of it was useless, unless he could get something that would quench that thirst — that urge, that fucking — that *fucking urge that refused to go away he wanted it to stop he wanted a drink he wanted a drink*.

The wall he'd built inside of his brain when he was thirteen came crumbling down.

Visions of hazy and blinding lighting from his bedside lamp, the distinct and sharp distortion of his digital alarm clock, the curly red hair of Kyle, the yarmulke he'd not removed yesterday, the doting annoyed eyes of someone who'd dealt with the exact situation of a drunk Stan Marsh one too many times. The sharp taste of his solace, the disgusting heat of vomit, the beauty of kisses on his forehead as he eased off into a drunken sleep.

Blackouts don't come back like that.

Stan curled forward, pressing his face into the floor. He wailed into the carpet. He paused, drawing in the shakiest breath his lungs could manage, and then wailed again. There was a stale stench against his nose; soured by weed. It threw him deeper into something he didn't understand. It was a reaction, deep and dark and animal, from the very worst places of his psyche. He was reduced to a human puddle on the floor, slumped against the rough texture of his carpet. He hugged the note to his chest, ignored the bag of weed. Ignored it until he could no longer. His eyes caught just the corner, and the implication of everything he'd done — just

the implication — was enough for his lungs to give in. He'd been running on empty for too long, and his respiratory system refused to keep up.

It came on slowly, with little cautious coughs, but then it hit all at once. He wheezed breaths into a body that hated itself. He swallowed against the pulling at the base of his throat. Stan rolled onto his knees, gasping at the air that surrounded him. His heart raced, sped like he was being chased, throbbed in a way that made him wonder if he was having a heart attack. He stumbled over to his nightstand, rummaging through it to find the spare inhaler he always had. With every grueling second that flashed past him, Stan was ripped into a paralyzing fright of *I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to die.*

~~Which devolved into *I want to I want to I want to.*~~

Stan finally found it, and shuffled himself backwards, his spine straightening when he leaned against the side of it. Everything inside of him told him to lean in, curl up, submit — but there was an autopilot. His body's will to live was stronger than his mind's wish to die.

He pressed the mouthpiece to his lips.

Exhale.

Press.

Pause.

Inhale.

Hold.

~~Breathe.~~

Repeat.

~~Breathe.~~

Repeat.

Breathe.

Stan wiped his eyes free of the tears that had begun to spill. He felt a cold radiating from within him, freezing away all of those evil thoughts. In its wake, it left nothing.

He sniffed.

And closed his eyes.

And put the inhaler down on the ground.

He curled up on himself, holding his knees to his chest. There was an absence of feeling, then. He felt out of it, like he'd had an experience that wasn't from his own life. He focused

on his breathing, but doing that made him angry. It bubbled up suddenly, slamming his chest and heart into a memory; a torn remnant of what it had been. He yelled out into the empty house. It was a sound he'd not ever made before. Raging, frustrated, broken. He slammed the heel of his palm against his thigh, and hissed a breath in through his teeth at the resulting ache. The knees of his jeans were damp in places from where his eyes left tears. Another flood of lividness erupted. Stan hit himself again, but this time against his head.

It hurt more, but it gave him relief.

And he devolved into a cycle. A horrid cycle that no one would be proud of, where he sunk into his own head and felt everything at a maximized level. He'd think a thought, and that thought would evoke a feeling, which would evoke his anger — at the world, at the people, at himself, and he'd collide the heel of his palm against the side of his head as hard as his body would let him. Eventually, his brain started to skip a step. He didn't think, he just felt and reacted. His mouth spilled.

"You worthless — " Stan grunted. His neck was starting to hurt with the consistent hitting. "You *worthless* — !"

But he never finished the thought. Maybe it was an instinctive protection his body had developed, something to keep himself from ruining his brain too thoroughly. Maybe it was conscious, maybe he didn't know how to finish it. But it was there, and it existed, and it ruined him so wholly, so totally, so completely...

Stan didn't know how long he sat there.

It was long enough for his mother to come in and see.

Stan couldn't imagine how it must have been to witness her son beating up the sides of his head like he was mentally disturbed — like he'd gone *psychotic*. In a way, he wondered if he *had* gone psychotic. Surely, someone who *wasn't* wouldn't feel so detached? He was torn. He was ripped to shreds, trying to get himself to find a semblance of control, trying to feel regular, like a normal human being, trying to feel alive, goddammit, he just wanted to go back, he wanted to wanted to *wanted to* —

He heard her yell something. Her tone was utterly concerned, and Stan knew that, but he couldn't register the words no matter how hard he tried. He was distracted by the sound of his palm against his head. *Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk* —

He felt her grip his wrists and pull his hands away from his head, and he could hear himself sob. A loud, disturbing cry that shook his entire being. It echoed in the room. And he repeated the cry, shuddering through it with agitated lungs. He repeated it again. And again. And again, until he found it muffled in the fabric of his mother's sweatshirt. She'd pulled him close, kept his hands immobile with one hand, and cradled the back of his head with the other. He didn't resist. He curled up against her, not caring that he felt like a whiny little kid, because he *was* a whiny little kid, and he needed to be, he couldn't not be. He regressed, sniffing and crying and gripping her shirt. His mother let go of his wrists, allowing him that freedom, and wrapped her other arm protectively around him.

“Oh, honey,” she whispered. “Oh, honey. It’s okay. It’s okay. You’re okay. Shhh...”

Stan hated that noise. He hated the noise of someone shushing, of someone hissing through their teeth like that. He’d hated it ever since he was a kid. It grated on his nerves, and tightened his anxiety — the anxiety he’d hardly remembered was even there. He whimpered, loud and booming against his own ears, but he knew it was probably pathetic to anyone else.

“I know. I know, sweetie, I know,” his mother hummed. And suddenly they were rocking, slowly and gently. She led them in a soft sway, one that calmed all of Stan’s previously infuriated nerves. Memories exploded inside of his brain. There were so many words to match to them, that he couldn’t do anything about them or sort them into logical sentences. He saw them, instead. They played in his head, situations where he’d soothed himself when he was the most stressed, where he rocked himself to sleep or when he was really little, in preschool, and he’d sway while he stood. Or when he was drunk, and he’d lose the inhibition to stop himself from doing that, because people don’t do that. Normal people don’t rock. They *don’t*. But it was okay, now. Right? “It’s okay, Stanley, it’s okay.”

It was okay.

“Just breathe, honey,” Sharon said. She smoothed her hand over his back, rubbing gentle circles against his shoulder blades. He tried, but his body wouldn’t follow. It just continued to shudder, taking in breaths only because it had to. “Just breathe.”

She breathed in, then, and Stan copied her. And then she breathed out, and Stan copied her. Rinse, and repeat.

Until he began to breathe on his own.

And he started to recover.

Slowly. It was slow. A slow, slow process, but it was necessary. And it started with breathing, with grounding and calm. Being told *it was okay*, even if it might not be. And once he’d gained the breathing, he could reign in his emotions. And once he reigned in his emotions, he could start to think. Words would come back, and he would no longer be rendered uselessly mute from his overwhelmed state.

And then the guilt would set in. The guilt *did* set in, and Stan felt humiliated by his loss of control. There was an ache in his lungs, and a horrible feeling in his stomach, and it made him ramble his confession.

“I did something bad, Mom,” he whispered. His voice cracked. She continued to sway with him, continued to smooth her hand across his back. “I did something really bad.”

And there was an unstated question in the air. *Can I talk to you about it?* And of course his mother replied, “it’s okay, Stanley. What happened?”

And his mouth opened once, and as soon as the first word came out, he was tumbling in sentences. He stuttered and wheezed the words, like an avalanche from one of those mountains.

He started with the weed. He confessed he'd stolen it from Dad; he'd been smoking since he was thirteen, and he'd never considered it an issue, because it wasn't like he was addicted to it, or anything. (He left out the part about the alcohol.) He rambled about how he got scared when she'd found it in his trashcan, and he'd put it all in a bag and planted it in a friend's room.

"I thought if I got rid of it, all of the problems would go away, and you'd leave it alone, and it'd be okay," Stan explained. His body was shaking, terrified of the repercussions of his actions. But he wasn't done yet. "But then you and Dad broke up because I hid it, and I got scared."

And he fell into the explanation about the friend. How *the friend* had found the weed, and *the friend* got pissed off that Stan would do such a thing. And now *the friend* refused to talk to him, and Stan had broken up with Wendy (he left out the part about cheating on her, because he didn't want his mom to know *that much* about his love life), and he felt lonely.

And she listened to him through it all. She kept rocking with him, and she kept rubbing his back. She didn't say anything until he'd finished, even when he had to pause to push back tears or cry into her shirt some more. When it was over, it felt like a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders — like he could be forgiven, in some weird way, because he'd told her (most) of the things he'd done wrong. There was a lull in the air as they both recovered from such an emotional event. Stan was left reeling. His heart was pounding in his throat, making him fall quiet. His mother said nothing for a moment, and he was afraid she'd get mad. He couldn't handle that right now.

"It's okay," she finally told him. She slowed the sway, until they were no longer rocking. It was all very still. Stan's torso itched, restless to continue the gentle back and forth motion, but he refused to let himself give in. "Your friend will forgive you. Just be honest with them. And if they don't, you can make other friends. You're such a kind boy, Stanley. You really are. You just made some mistakes. You're only human."

His mother kissed the top of his head. He wasn't sure if he felt grossed out by that or not. More than anything, he felt indifferent. He felt apathetic. He didn't know what else he'd been expecting from her, really. What could she do, other than try to comfort him? Her advice was sweet, and he appreciated it, but it didn't help him feel much better. Then again, he didn't really feel much at all, in the moment. Sharon withdrew from Stan, and Stan took that as a cue to withdraw from her, too. He hugged his legs to his chest again, resting his chin on his knees.

"I'll talk to your father," she said. She got to her feet, and bent in front of the bag of weed. She picked it up. "I'm going to take this, too. No more marijuana in this house. We've had enough of it for a lifetime."

Stan agreed. He said nothing, but he nodded his head, affirming her statement silently.

"Stanley." Stan looked up. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom," he said. She smiled at him, a small expression that effected her whole face. He forced himself to return the smile, but it felt artificial. He felt disingenuous.

He felt like a liar.

She left his room, but kept his door open. He could understand why.

Stan couldn't explain what he was feeling, at that moment, because he was feeling many things. He felt dishonest, and he felt like a horrible person, and he felt lost. He felt better than he'd been before, but he also felt empty. His head was aching, and he attributed that to his immature version of self-harm. Something in his brain told him to go further with it, that he *deserved* it, but his bones were much too tired. He just didn't have the energy. Hurting himself was too much work.

His eyes were half-lidded, and they felt raw from his crying, but he paid it no mind. He stood, shaky on legs that felt too real, and kicked his inhaler aside for now. He'd put it away later. For now? He slowly slid into bed. He pulled up the covers, tucking them around his body and curling into a ball on his side. He buried his nose against the fabric, urging himself to feel comforted by the soft, but no such feeling came. He was just present. He was just existent. He was just another constant.

He was just Stan Marsh.

He was just there.

Everything was there.

And it was shit.

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE UPDATE!

i got bored, so i uploaded this chapter early. i hope y'all don't mind too much, haha.
the next update will almost definitely be on sunday (November 25th)!
unless i get bored and upload early again, pfft

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

A Sober Man's Thoughts

Chapter Summary

Having free-flowing thoughts was liberating.

Stan knew it was bad when he woke up feeling numb.

He'd expand on that, but there wasn't much more to say. The light shred in through a crack in his curtains. Stray twigs from a tree outside scraped his window. Birds twittered in the morning atmosphere. His alarm was blaring.

"— listen, Tom, I don't know if you went to see that new horror film last week —"

"Oh, you mean the one with the blond?"

"Yeah, the one with the blond, I don't know if you went to see it or not, did you?"

"Of course I did, who didn't?"

Maybe that was the thing that scared Stan the most. The alarm, calling to him with the usual podcast. Whenever he woke up, he always felt agitated. He always got pissed off at the noise, and at the thought of hearing people talk. His blood would begin to boil at the sheer concept of interaction. But that morning, with the sun cutting through his curtains and the birds chirping serenely outside, Stan felt absolutely nothing.

Stan was a wall, a lump of plaster, an immovable collection of biology. There was no heartbeat in his chest that he could feel. Breathing was automatic in a way that was completely absent. His eyes refused to close, though his brain gave him the signals that he should go back to bed. There was an absent thought, rather than a feeling, that he'd not gotten nearly enough sleep.

The alarm finally stopped. The podcast no longer spoke. All was silent.

A thought: no one would give a damn if he just ceased to exist.

Normally, there stood a barrier between himself and the thoughts that dug him into holes. That day (with the light, and the birds, and the lack of an alarm), Stan came to an inordinate conclusion that his barrier had shattered. Dust and sand was all that remained, caking his joints in paralyzing, numb agony the likes of which he was certain he'd not felt before. Stan closed his eyes, for the simple reason that he was unable to keep them open any longer. He told himself to breathe, but it made no difference. His thoughts came across bored and unsavory; bitter and without a reason.

Thought number two: the world, and everything in it, was shit.

Numb. Numb, numb, numb, and more numb. Words. Adjectives and synonyms and antonyms and systems and phrases and thoughts. Words, words, words. Mumble, mumble. Do you hear the trees outside?

Stan did. Sentences ceased to correlate, but his mind created a picture from the absence of light his eyes had caused. Trees spider-webbed like veins behind his eyes, crackling invisible images onto windswept and frosting windows. A shadow of a curtain blocked sunlight, but a dagger slammed into the cloth and ripped it to pieces. An explosion, Stan thought. Inside of his brain, right where the real version of himself was. Cracked and broken like an old doll, he could imagine that, too. A dress caked in dirt and soot and fraying, plastic hair and eyes that refused to close. Glassy. Trapped. Breathe, or whatever.

Unfortunately, Stan did. His lungs filled halfway, and then emptied halfway. A give and take that did nothing for him other than keep him alive.

Thought number three: any categorization of the human race, no matter how evolved, will always be greedier than an animal.

He'd read that in a book, once. He'd situated himself in a corner of a library and taken all of the information in. That was back when he thought he had dreams. When he was a freshman, his thoughts would get the best of him. He'd ignore the world and think only of reading and thinking his way through the day. Years had passed since he'd been so blind, and he couldn't honestly say he missed it. For, the truth of the matter was, he didn't. There was no yearning in his chest. There was no wish to return to the "way things were". A drink was tempting, and his brain tried to lurch into the air and find something as a substitute, but his body said no.

More birds. Something shuffled from downstairs. Stan sniffed.

Dizzy.

Had he eaten yesterday?

Coffee. Half a sip of apple juice. Water. Aspirin. That was it.

Unfortunate.

Maybe he could starve.

Having free-flowing thoughts was liberating.

A dryness in his mouth. He traced his tongue against the sides of his teeth, which complained as he clenched them. He tried to relax his jaw, but that was easier said than done. There was something stressing him out, his brain told him, but he couldn't figure out what it was. The feelings he usually relied on to tell him what was wrong were so redundantly unavailable.

A creak. Footsteps. Logistical, sensory observation told him it was his mother. The way she walked was specific. Footfall was a highly individualistic thing. He'd heard someone tell him that before. Footsteps are just as distinctive, possibly more so, than fingerprints. The merit

behind the claim was questionable, at best, especially since he couldn't recall from whom he'd heard the statement. Those footsteps came to a halt just beside his bed. He could feel her standing there, watching him. His eyes were closed, and his back was turned to the rest of his room, but he could still feel her there. Her hand slowly splayed over his shoulder, and she shook him in a very gentle way.

"Time to wake up," he heard her say. Her voice was a murmur, hardly loud enough to inspire him to respond. Not that a statement of louder volume would make him feel any more inclined to reply, of course. The motivation to do so just simply wasn't there. He ignored her to the entirety of his ability, which wasn't difficult. She didn't give up. She shook him again after a minute or so. "Come on, up, up, up."

How annoying. But, after he remained unresponsive, she finally withdrew. His brain told him he was relieved, which was good, since he didn't feel it himself. He could hear himself breathe against the pillow his face was nuzzled against. His clothes stuck to him with a minuscule sheen of sweat, like he'd overheated in his sleep. Knowing him, it wasn't unlikely that such a thing had occurred. *That feels gross*, his brain told him, but he felt no such thing. He didn't care.

There was a tiny dip in the mattress as his mother pressed her hand against it, moving to settle next to him. His feet slid with the adjustment, and she carefully pushed his legs to the side so she wouldn't end up sitting on them. For a moment, she said nothing, but then the moment passed, and she was patting his calf. "Time to wake up," she said again. And, when he said nothing: "Stan, wake up."

Get out, his brain growled. Stan, on the other hand, remained silent. Recognition was too much effort, and he knew as an undeniable fact that he would need to conserve as much energy as possible just to stay alive today. His brain began to sort out reasonings, like a list of important pinpoints that resulted in his lack of movement.

- 1. Today will be a bad day, I just know it.**
- 2. It's not like anyone will miss me, it's just one day.**
- 3. School is pointless, I'll fail anyway.**
- 4. I need to recover.**

Unfortunately, Sharon couldn't read his thoughts. Her knowledge and understanding of the situation was severely limited, with a lack of communication between them; and Stan knew such a thing. He understood that she couldn't possibly know what was going on with him, not to the extent that he needed her to. To get her to understand, he would need to speak — but that task, that one little thing, was so impossible. There was nothing in his throat for him to make words. His tongue was cotton in his mouth, rendering him mute.

"Come on, Stanley, I need to know you're awake." More patting. More shaking. Her tone was annoyed. She obviously wasn't happy with him. He didn't care.

Get out! shouted his brain. *I can't handle it! It's too much!*

Stan forced his eyes open, though they complained against the light in his room. He thought, maybe, if he just opened his eyes, she'd leave him alone. Maybe he could trick her into

thinking he'd woken up. Maybe he could fall back to sleep and wake up when he was able to feel again. So many maybes, but not enough action. His mother didn't notice any change, and that just spurred her on further. Her shaking had ceased, and finally, her hand was gone from his shoulder. Not even a moment later, her fingers found their way to his sides. He'd always been ticklish there. To that day, there existed no better way than that to get him out of bed.

But, that day, when she tried, nothing happened.

His body didn't react.

He couldn't even be bothered to feel ticklish anymore.

Sharon withdrew.

Please, get out.

"Did you take your medication yesterday?" she asked him, her tone now significantly softer than it had been before. Her hand was back on his shoulder, but she was no longer shaking or patting him. She simply rested it there. As a formality, Stan thought about it. He mulled the question, trying to remember the last dose he took. A few days ago, from what he could remember. His brain refused to acknowledge the logic in that.

Stan had accidentally missed doses before. Sure, he'd never missed more than one day in a row, but he'd also never had such horrible days without them. It convinced him, then, that the medicine didn't work. It had been a temporary fix. Maybe it was starting to lose effectiveness. If he took them again, would they do anything? Would he ever feel normal again? Was it even a good thing to stay on the medication? His father always told him to tough it out. *Once you start taking medicine to deal with your problems, you can't deal with your problems without the medication. That's weak. You don't want to be weak, Stan, do you?* That's what his dad had said. Stan breathed out. His eyes slipped shut.

"You didn't, did you?" she asked. Stan could hear the frown in her voice. She stood, the mattress springing up in a subdued fashion as it was relieved from the weight of an extra person. She was no longer touching him. Until she was, very suddenly, and she was urging him to roll over. He acquiesced, if only because he had no energy to protest. And then, she was asking him to sit up. He didn't know what happened, then. His brain decided to ignore the process. But the next thing he knew, he was upright, and his eyes were open. The room around him tilted, and then over-corrected itself like he'd been spinning on a merry-go-round for too long. Sharon said something else, but he wasn't listening. He was having fun just staring at a dark stain on the wall opposite him, right next to the door. That's what his brain told him, at least. *This is fun.*

He needed a drink.

His mother patted his shoulder, and then left the room. He hardly noticed. He simply continued to sit there, with his legs dangling over the side of his bed and his feet just a bit above the floor. He scratched his knee, like there was a point. Maybe if he just pretended to be happy, he could trick himself into feeling normal again? That's gotta be how regular people function in the world. There was no way people could get through their day feeling

genuinely okay with themselves. Surely everyone was just living in a state of constant self-hatred. Some were just better at hiding it than others. It was exactly such a philosophy that Stan contemplated as he fused his gaze to the stain on the wall. Such a mundane visual to go with his outlook. His brain told him it was fitting, and he found no reason to suggest otherwise.

Sharon came back in a few minutes later, a cup of water in one hand and his bottle of antidepressants in the other. He hardly glanced over, still particularly enraptured by the wall he'd been focusing on. His respite lasted only so long, however; his mother shifted to the side and stood immediately in front of him, effectively blocking the view he had of the spot. He forced himself to look at her, his eyes particularly drawn to the orange bottle of pills. A drop of water slid down the outside of the glass. Sharon set the cup on his bedside table for a moment, twisting the cap off of the prescription bottle with a soft series of clicks.

"You can stay home," she began, dumping the proper dose into her palm, "if you take these."

She screwed the cap back on. She set the bottle aside. She looked at him. He looked at her. A few moments passed. Then, she refused to wait any longer. She took his wrist into her free hand, and carefully placed the pill into his palm. It was weighty, and he struggled to hold it, even if he still had a tiny reserve of energy. His hand wanted to fall down, open, release the pill onto the floor. His body wanted to crawl into bed and wallow in its own self-pity, staring at a wall until he and all that he stood for lost meaning. He was tired of the ground he stood on. Tired.

Stan pushed away the urge to refuse the medication. He tightened his grip, even when he wanted only to collapse. He waited. He stared at the water on the nightstand. He thought.

She caught where his gaze had landed, and moved slowly, grabbing the cup and handing it out for him to take. Stan did. He took it. The glass was cold against his palm, and he wondered if that was all the sensation he'd be able to feel. Cold and hot. Mild discomfort from the sweat that accumulated from his exceedingly long period of sleep. He should shower. He stared at the pill in his hand, instead. It glared at him. His body wanted to swallow it. His brain refused to let him.

Stan lifted his hand and tossed his head back, pressing the pill to his mouth. He clenched his hand into a fist as he dropped it, again, to his lap. His mouth tightened. His teeth clenched. He looked at his mother. *Swallow*, said his brain. Reluctance. He lifted the cup, and his head was back to being tipped back. He downed the water like a shot. It fell down his throat, and it cooled his esophagus. Then the cup was lowered, and he was staring at it like it offended him in some sickening way. Like — just existing was inherently wrong. And, for him, he understood that it was. For, just the water being so pure, was a sin.

He *needed* alcohol.

"Thank you," Sharon said to him. He didn't react. His gaze was ultimately unfocused, disturbed and blurry. She stroked a hand so gingerly through his hair, smoothing it back and away from his face, out of his eyes. He could feel the budding pain of wanting something so badly, so desperately. He pushed for that feeling, that yearning, but it fled him before he could understand what was going on. His mother pressed a kiss to his forehead, gathered the

cup and the bottle of antidepressants, and stood. She held both in one hand. Suddenly, she was at the door. “I have to go to work. Don’t stay in bed all day, please.”

He forced a nod. She was smiling, he knew, but it was the type of smile that shouldn’t be returned. A pitying smile that spoke louder of him as a person than it spoke of her. Cold echoed in his stomach like an empty pit, sending him into a downward spiral of debilitating shocks. She’d since left, and now that he was alone in his room, he was simultaneously uncaring and...

He needed alcohol.

With shaking legs and a newfound goal, Stan got to his feet. They trembled beneath him, reminding him of a newborn foal. It took thought to bring him to the trashcan. It glared at him, too.

He opened his hand.

He dropped the pill, which he had not swallowed, into the trashcan.

You don’t need it, his brain told him. And, with no one to tell him otherwise, Stan believed it.

He lingered for maybe an hour more in his bedroom, not moving from where he stood. Perhaps he’d gotten lost in thought, but to say he remembered any of his internal ramblings would be a lie. A more accurate statement would be “*he lost time*.” Stan was not bothered by such a fact, however. He had more important things to think about.

Stan left his room and descended the stairs without dressing himself fully. He wore boxers and a thin, brittle tee shirt he’d had for a few years. It was bright, once upon a time, but after a hundred or so washes, the dyes had faded. He ambled into the kitchen, kicking at a stray leaf with his socked foot. One look around the house, and he knew his mother had long since left. He was home alone. He had nine hours of freedom.

Stan could do anything he wanted. He could kill himself right there, right then, and no one would know until it was much too late. There was something so disgusting in the way he thought about his own death. Perhaps he was nihilistic, or perhaps he was simply too far gone to really give a damn. Or, hell, it had a name.

It was called *being a cynical asshole*, wasn’t it?

Whatever.

Stan tugged open the refrigerator and began rooting around inside. He needed to find something. Anything — just a little, of whatever he could find, to keep him held over for the day. Just a sip. Fuck, just the thought of a sip was enough to get him excited. There was something liberating about no longer being sober. He’d been sober. He’d been clean. Four years — impressive, of course it was. He understood that. But, after the impression of his sobriety, he’d broken it, and Stan couldn’t honestly say he wanted to go back to it.

Maybe the weed was just a temporary substitute, after all.

He searched through every little nook and cranny of the fridge multiple times over, but he came up completely dry. It was impossible. His dad had the same issue. The same issue. He'd left two days ago, and, what, that was it? The first thing his mother had done was throw out all the beer? What the fuck? Did she know? What did she know? *How did she know?*

Stan slammed the refrigerator door shut abruptly. Maybe he could find some wine, or something, somewhere. He'd seen his mom drink wine. Not often, but she did it. So, by that logic, there had to be some *somewhere*.

Just a little bit, please, God, just a little bit.

Rummaging through the kitchen took both too long and too fast. Too long in reality, but too fast in every other aspect. His brain reeled. It crackled thoughts into his brain that, normally, he'd be able to hold at bay. There had to be something. There was never not something. Something. Something, something, something.

The kitchen spun around him, teetering from one side and then to the other. A dizziness ebbed across his eyes. He understood what was going on before it actually happened. There's something instinctual in it. Even so, it's not something he could describe. He knew what would happen. Maybe, if he got something to drink, he could prevent it. Maybe a cup of coffee. They still had some left. His mother had left it in the pot.

Stan grabbed a coffee mug from the cabinet. It was smooth under his fingers. His hands felt full of the heavy material. It helped him feel a little more at ease with the place he was in. The kitchen stank of overdone and burning things, like the too-sweet after effects of leaving bacon unattended for just a minute too long. He shook as he made his way towards the coffee pot. He contemplated getting a shot glass. He contemplated filling it with coffee — or, better yet, filling it with apple juice. It looked similar to what he'd rather be having. If he pretended, maybe it would help. Maybe it'd help. Maybe, maybe, maybe. He didn't get that far in his planning, however, for he'd already started to fill his mug with a small amount of coffee. It steamed up the inside of the mug, and the heat blasted his face. He replaced the pot and stared, both hands gripping the mug. His throat tried to reject it as he swallowed it down, pushing himself as far as he could. His mouth had warmed, and his teeth felt fragile. It wasn't nearly as smooth as the water. He felt it catch in a few places on the way to his stomach. His brain told him he was disturbed by that. His brain said to him, *you don't like that*. Stan shook his head, trying to free his mind of the thoughts.

You don't like it. You don't like it. You don't like it.

Stan turned, his eyes shut, his hands still holding the mug. The thoughts refused to go. They were still there, looping in an endless cycle, pounding into his very being like nails into an overused tent. Moldy. Rotten. On the verge of being thrown out.

You don't like it. You don't like it. You don't like it.

Suddenly, Stan stopped shaking his head. He opened his eyes, and when he did, a burst of light exploded across his vision. Instinct overtook his entire self, and he dropped the mug in favor of turning away from the source of light. He hardly registered the sound of shattering porcelain. A strange sensation bolted from his temples and shot its way down his spine. It

tensed his shoulders and reached his hands, making them feel warm and tingly. Even after the strange phenomenon had passed, Stan had issues recovering. He didn't know what he'd experienced. In fact, he had no idea. He couldn't begin to comprehend what it could have been. He pried his eyes open, forcing himself to examine the kitchen. He tried to figure out a logical explanation for the explosion of light he'd seen, but upon his inspection, there was nothing. No logical reason. He carded his fingers through his hair, transferring hands with every pass. Then, with both hands against his scalp, he pulled. His hair complained.

Should he be concerned?

The shattered remnants of the mug lay, scattered, at his feet. Light from the window reflected off of the glaze, giving it an overwhelmingly shiny look. Bits of porcelain created a hardly visible constellation against the kitchen floor. Something familiar. There was — there was something so familiar about this.

You have more than one, said his brain into his ear. He pressed the heel of his palm against his ear, shielding himself from further incorporeal words. That didn't stop it from coming back, though, much more insistent. He could hear it over his shoulder. He could practically feel the presence behind him. If he focused, he could feel the horrid, disgusting heat of someone else's breath against his neck. When his brain spoke again, it took on a different voice — the voice of Kyle. *Isn't that right, Stan?*

Stan shut down.

He lowered himself to the floor, sitting distraught among the stars he'd forced onto the floor. Sharp edges nicked his legs, but he didn't care. At least he'd drank all the coffee, so there was no liquid to mop up. He keeled over, holding his head in his hands.

A final thought.

He choked on his first words of the day.

“What have I done?”

Intermission IV

Chapter Summary

So much death.

I can't keep going on like this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

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Stan,

It's almost two thirty in the morning. I can't stop yawning, and I want nothing more than to sleep, but I can't. I can't sleep without writing to you. I don't understand why. I don't even know what to say. What am I supposed to say?

Hospitals are daunting, I guess. They're full of so many noises. It's kind of hard to think. Like, I'm surrounded by so many people, and their lives are being measured with a set of beeps and wheezes and whirs. I hate hospitals. Did you know that? I know you hate hospitals, but I don't think you know I hate hospitals, too.

Well, I do. I didn't always hate hospitals. I used to like them. They felt homely. That must be weird to hear. But, when I was growing up, I kind of wanted to be a doctor. (And by kind of, I mean I *really* wanted to be a doctor.) And, in a really weird, sentimental way, I still kind of do. But I know I wouldn't be happy in that profession. Not anymore. Funny how things change, isn't it?

So many germs. So much illness. So much noise.

So much death.

I'm so scared, Stan. I'm scared. I really just want someone here with me. I want you here with me. I want a hug. I want to cuddle. And I hate that word, I hate it so much. It sounds so childish. But it's true. I just want to be as close to you as possible. But I can't. I can't. And I hate that. I hate you.

That's what I tell myself, at least.

It hurts to look at you. It hurts to think about you. It hurts to write to you. My arm hurts. My wrist is cramping. I'm switching hands.

Thanks for following me, by the way. I appreciate it. I know I didn't show it, but in my defense, that wasn't really a high priority in my mind at the moment. I can't say much more, because I'm still not feeling strong enough to open up about my bullshit. But, whatever. My point is thank you. Thank you for being stupid and doing the one thing I told you not to do.

Life is fucking ridiculous. It's cruel. I feel hopeless. Like I'm not in control. Like I never was in control. Not once. It was just a farce. All of it. And I don't know how I'm supposed to not be in control. I'm not used to it. It's just not how my brain works. I have systems. I have routines. I have things that need to be certain ways and if I can't have them in those ways, I get freaked out.

If I can't be in control, I don't know if anything's worth it.

Fuck it. I can't keep going on like this. I can't.

Please write back. Or text me. Or something. Anything?

I miss you.

Sincerely,
your super-best-friend Kyle.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be up tomorrow (monday, november 26th)!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Blood and Water

Chapter Summary

“I’m not going to do anything!”

Chapter Notes

content warning for attempted self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Why are your legs all cut up?”

Kenny stood in the doorway of the Marsh house. It was just a few minutes past one in the afternoon, and the sun shone high in the sky behind him. The glare intruded offensively, causing Stan to squint. Cold drifted in through the open door. His legs itched from a lack of protection. It had been a bad idea not to put on a pair of pants. At least he wore boxers. Unwilling to deal with all of this, Stan grabbed the door handle and began to pull it shut. There was a slapping noise, and the door refused to budge further. Stan looked up. Kenny’s gaze had sharpened, and he’d grabbed the side of the door with his gloved hand. A cloud blew out in front of him every time he exhaled.

“Dude,” said Kenny, practically spitting the word. “Don’t shut the door on me, that’s fucking lame.”

Stan sighed. “What are you doing here?”

Something behind Kenny’s eyebrow twitched. A strip across his nose was a brighter tone than the rest of his skin, and the flesh-colored bandage sparkled like a road sign from the weird effect of a passing car’s headlights. Such a decal on Kenny’s face was practically expected, at this point. He wondered if such a thing could be considered cliché. “Kyle’s worried about you,” he heard Kenny say. He didn’t understand the words, though. They didn’t process.

“Do you really hit your nose that often?” Stan asked. Kenny’s hand went up to his face, his fingertips gently tracing the body of the band-aid. “Or is it just habit?”

“What are you even talking about?” Kenny replied. He dropped his hand back to his side. “Were you even listening to me?”

Stan took the chance to shut the door again. He almost managed, but Kenny stuck his foot in the way of it before he could complete the action. Things changed. The world shifted. Kenny grabbed the edge of the door, again, and yanked it open. The door handle escaped Stan's hand. Before he understood what was going on, Kenny had pushed him further inside the house and followed him in. The door slammed behind them. Stan's back hit the banister. Kenny wasted no time, then, ripping off his winter gloves and tossing them in a corner. They hit Stan's backpack and slid to the floor.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself," Kenny said. His nails clinked with the zipper of his parka as he tugged it down. It crackled the way faux-metal did, a continuous noise that grated on Stan's ears more than the shushing of his mother. He subconsciously brought his hand up to cover his ear. "I understand it's really tempting to just hole yourself up at home, but it's seriously not healthy, I'm not kidding."

The parka followed the gloves to the floor. Seeing Kenny without the large coat was strange. It was unusual to be able to see his arms. Even so, the white wife-beater he wore was ultimately unsurprising. Dog tags clinked together with his every movement. Only the chain was visible; the tags themselves hung beneath his shirt, against his clavicle. The style was oddly fitting.

"Have you showered yet?" questioned Kenny, promptly shoving his hands into the pockets of his cargo pants. Stan rolled his eyes. He waved off the question with a flick of his hand in the air. He squeezed past Kenny, then, narrowly managing to keep their shoulders from bumping. Kenny's dominant footsteps followed after him as he made his way to the kitchen. "Are you seriously ignoring me right now?"

"Why are you *here*?" Stan asked again, much more insistent.

"Did you not hear me say 'Kyle's worried about you'?"

"Oh, please," replied Stan. He crouched among the pieces of mug that he had yet to clean up. The sharp corners of the porcelain dug into the flesh of his palms as he scooped the shards up by the handful. "If you really expect me to believe that, you're dumb."

What a Craig thing to say, said his brain.

"God, now you sound like Craig," Kenny scoffed. The idea was a short-lived observation. "Have you been hanging around him, or something?"

No, Stan wanted to say, but the word wouldn't come out. His brain told him to squeeze the shattered bits of mug, and since his body had no reason to object, he simply did. The pokes turned into stabs. His knees complained against the hard tiles of the kitchen. The thought of doing something irreparable crossed his mind. It was strange how much that sensation of pain affected him. As soon as it registered, the rest of his arms itched to feel, too. Perhaps it was shitty of him, but he enjoyed the idea of seeing himself like that. Not just because he wanted to feel something, but also because he wanted to spark worry in other people. He wanted someone to see. He wanted someone to know. He wanted someone to care. It felt gross. It felt disgusting and angsty and absolutely immature, but he couldn't help it.

“What the fuck!” Kenny’s exclamation cut through the air. Stan startled out of his trance. He could see Kenny’s boots out of the corner of his eye, and he felt Kenny crouch down next to him. Kenny grabbed Stan’s wrist. His fingers were rough, the same way Stan’s used to be when he played guitar every day after school. Kenny pried Stan’s fingers open, pushing the shards out of his grip and onto the floor. “What the hell, man, what are you doing? What’s gotten into you?”

The backs of Kenny’s hands were rubbed raw and red from the cold, chapped and cracking at the knuckles. Spots of blood barely bubbled up from the particularly deep crevices in his skin. “You need lotion,” Stan blurted. He felt Kenny freeze, in the midst of brushing the rest of the minuscule pieces out of Stan’s hands. “The backs of your hands are like alligator skin.”

Quiet.

A beat.

And then, Kenny said, “really?”

Stan looked up. His gaze bounced between Kenny’s eyes, before settling on the bandage that was stuck to the bridge of his nose. Kenny looked back at him.

“You were literally trying to cut yourself right in front of me, and you’re telling me I need *lotion*? Yeah, because *that’s* normal, and now is the time to bring that up. Seriously, bro, what the fuck is wrong with you?” Kenny’s top lip curled as he finished talking, like even acknowledging all of this was enough to disgust him. Stan didn’t let that idea bother him, for he knew it was most likely true. Stan felt bare and naked without the porcelain in his palms, and he dragged his hand over his wrist in an attempt to self-soothe. He dipped his head, his hair falling into his eyes, as he stared at the smooth, unmarred skin of his arms. Fucking hell.

Fucking *hell*, and to think he’d have hurt himself if someone wasn’t there to stop him.

“Is that what happened to your legs?” Kenny asked, suddenly very quiet. He gestured to the tiny nicks that dotted Stan’s shins and knees. “You tried to hurt yourself?”

“No,” Stan choked. There was a spot in his throat that felt raw, like he’d been talking too long. He needed water. “I didn’t even notice... I just — I dropped the mug, and it broke, and I freaked out and didn’t think about where I sat down.”

Kenny sighed. “Okay. Okay, fine. This is fine.” Quiet scrapes sounded against the tile of the kitchen as he carefully brushed the remnants of the broken mug into his hands. He hoisted himself to his feet, and dropped the material into the garbage can. When he turned back around, he’d started to swipe his hands together, ridding his palms of the rest like they were caked in a sort of dust. A finishing motion. “You know what you need? A shower.”

And then Kenny approached him, a hand outstretched in offering to Stan. Although tempted to ignore him and stand on his own, he knew that wouldn’t be a good option. *Push him away*, said his brain, but he figured he’d done enough listening to his brain for one day. Stan took Kenny’s hand, and grunted as he got to his feet. A quiet “thanks” escaped his lips, but it was pushed aside almost immediately. He had to blink away the confusion of suddenly being

forced to walk. Kenny lead the way down the hallway and up the stairs, an arm draped, supportive, across Stan's shoulders the whole way. "You don't have to do this, you know," Stan said.

"That's where you're wrong, friend," was all Kenny answered with. He removed his arm from Stan's shoulders, and then carefully ushered him to sit down on the closed toilet seat. When Stan tried to refuse, Kenny jabbed him in the ribs with the side of his hand. Needless to say, he sat down. Through half-lidded, exhausted eyes, Stan observed as Kenny leaned inside the shower stall. He couldn't comprehend what his friend was doing, at first, but then the water sputtered on. Kenny messed with the dials for a second, one hand under the spray from the shower head.

"You *really* don't have to do this," Stan tried again, but Kenny wouldn't listen. He'd already nabbed a towel from the rack and tossed it over the bar. Kenny leaned out of the shower stall, spots of his shirt darkened from the splash of water. Kenny turned on his heel, meandering to the bathroom door. Stan almost breathed a sigh of relief, convinced that Kenny was going to leave him be, but he was granted no such respite. Instead, Kenny simply leaned his shoulder against the door frame, his arms crossed over his chest. Sure, his back was to Stan, but that wasn't exactly the same as being alone. "Kenny, c'mon..."

"Dude, do I really need to undress you, too?" replied Kenny. "Because I don't want to do that. Like, I *can*, but I don't want to."

Such an implication made Stan thoroughly uncomfortable, thus easily getting the message across. He wasn't happy about it, but he ultimately decided to give in. It was with a displeased noise that he undressed, tossing his clothes into a small pile on the floor next to the shower. When he climbed into the shower, the water was lukewarm. It made Stan's skin crawl, so he reached to adjust it warmer.

"Don't touch those dials," Kenny called before he could even graze a nail against the metal. Stan rolled his eyes.

"Dude, it's fucking cold in here."

"It's not, you're just a pussy."

An urge to retaliate echoed through Stan, but he pushed it down before it could take over. He heaved an exhale and turned, uncapping the bottle of shampoo. The smell of apples wafted up into his face immediately, giving him a distinct sense of familiarity. It was a chore, just to squeeze some into his palm and work it through his hair. His arms fell tired immediately, and his hands tingled. It was almost as if all of the blood had decided to stop flowing past his elbows. Water pelted his back, and he tipped his head into the spray to rinse the soap out of his hair.

Whoosh.

Cold air whipped into the shower stall, and Stan gasped. He spun around to see the intrusion, only for his personal space to very suddenly be invaded by a blond mess of hair.

“S’cuse me, pardon me,” Kenny said, casually reaching past Stan for something on the shelf in the wall. A shit-eating grin had plastered itself across his mouth, even as the water started soaking into his hair and dripping down his cheeks. To say Stan felt violated would be an understatement. Kenny withdrew, and held up the item he’d been reaching for as he exited the shower and closed the door of the stall behind him. “Almost forgot this.”

“Dude, that’s my freaking razor,” Stan hissed. He was torn between ripping the shower door open and rinsing the rest of the suds out of his hair before they fell into his eyes. He settled for finishing the rinse, pushing his fingers through sections of snarled hair. It hurt to comb his fingers through it, but he really didn’t feel inclined to steal any of his mom’s conditioner.

“Yeah, I know, I’m not blind,” replied Kenny. His voice was muffled from the loud stream of water that spat past Stan’s ears. “I don’t exactly trust you with sharp things at the moment.”

Stan groaned. “I’m not going to *do* anything!”

“You’re really shit at showing that.”

“I’m — ” but Stan’s argument cut off short. Being choleric about it wasn’t going to do anything. Kenny was stubborn, and in that way, he was kind of like Kyle. Besides, he had a point. Stan had never known himself to *ever* actively think about doing that sort of thing, but that apparently didn’t matter, because he’d almost done it. He wondered if that counted as impulsiveness, even if he’d hardly realized he was thinking about it. He wondered what that might mean. Overwhelmed by implications and empty thoughts, Stan dug the heels of his palms into his eyes and tried to think his way through the roller coaster that was his morning. He didn’t understand what was going on with him. He understood it was probably due to stress, but he didn’t understand why his mind refused to let him just *get over it* already.

And one thought led to another, and before long, he was staring at the drain and wondering where he might be able to find a drink. A cramp started in the center of his stomach at the thought. He wanted to close his eyes and ward off the images that swirled past him, but he knew that would just make it worse. Intrusive, nimble thoughts scratched into his head and rolled his spine until he was unsteady. The more he tried to shut it off, the quicker the thoughts came, until they were the only thing going on inside of his head. His internal monologue was entirely filled with *drink drink drink drink drink where? How? When?*

Stan pressed a hand to his chest and dug his fingers against his sternum. His heart thundered, and very suddenly, he understood he needed out. He needed out. He needed *out he needed out out out* —

“Oi, talk to me, Stan,” Kenny called. His rough voice successfully broke Stan out of his contiguous streams of thought. He was able to pay attention to something else, rather than just the thoughts that tried to force him into a heap. (Even if they were still there, beneath it all, it helped to have something else to focus on.) “Don’t tell me you fell asleep standing up in there.”

“No,” Stan replied, the word slow. He carded his fingers through his tangled hair to reorient himself, and slowly moved to grab the bar of soap and wash the rest of his body. “Um... what do you want me to say?”

“Anything, man,” answered Kenny. “I just want to make sure you don’t, like, die, or whatever, in there... so, what’s on your mind?”

Snap.

Drink drink drink —

No. No, anything but that.

Stan drew in a little breath.

“Not much,” he said, picking a piece of lint off of the soap. He spent perhaps too long mulling over his next words, weighing pros and cons of his statement, only to blurt it out anyway. “In my defense, I don’t usually do that.”

“Do what?”

“Like... try to hurt myself, and shit? I don’t do that.”

A pause. “Oh. Good.”

And then the bathroom was silent again. Only the quiet *shahhh* of the water peppering the inside of the shower stall could be heard. Stan swallowed thickly, and moved to finish washing himself. He almost dropped the soap twice, and both times, he cursed. Each of those times, Kenny had called out to make sure he hadn’t fallen, and Stan always replied with a curt affirmation that, no, he had not fallen, and yes, he was fine.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Stan put the soap down and pushed the dial down to stop the flow of water. It tapered to a drip, and then the drip slowed to a completion. Stan stood there, in a slowly cooling shower stall, dripping from head to toe and trying to rebuild the walls that had been destroyed last night. So much expansion, so much brick and mortar was needed, it was a task that he considered borderline impossible. Years of hard work and dedication to keeping all of the pieces of himself contained in his center, were gone. Those pieces of himself, including the bad ones that blamed and wanted and wished and hoped and *craved*, spilled through his head like a box too big for contents so small.

“I’m coming out, so you better turn around,” Stan finally called out.

“Got it,” came Kenny’s response.

Stan slowly opened the shower door, his damp hand slipping against it for a second. Before he stepped out, he reached around and snagged the towel from the bar. He wrapped it around his hips and held it steady as he exited, using the wall to keep himself steady. There was a rug that refused to let him slip, but that didn’t mean his legs didn’t feel ready to fall apart at any given moment.

Kenny refused to leave, even as Stan put effort into his convincing argument for why he should leave. Kenny didn’t explain his own side past, “I don’t trust you”, which Stan found both incredibly illogical, and simultaneously reasonable. He was grateful for the fact that Kenny kept his back turned as he toweled off. There was an entire outfit folded up on the

edge of the sink, which Stan found a little strange. He had no idea when Kenny had organized that, or when he'd found the time to go gather an outfit, but he decided against questioning it. He simply dressed himself with silent thanks, and gathered his old, rather miserable excuse for an outfit up in his arms.

Stan pushed past Kenny to toss the old clothes in the hamper, and as he did, Kenny followed after him closely.

"So, what's going on between you and Kyle?" Kenny asked him as they journeyed down the stairs. His combat boots thudded heavily against the carpeted wood, and his dog tags jingled against each other. Stan could hear it clearly.

"Is that why you came?" Stan responded, rerouting his walk with the help of the end of the banister underneath his hand. He collapsed onto the couch, the back of his neck hitting the hard foundation of the arm rest. He swung himself to lay down, and tossed his feet over the edge of the other arm rest. Kenny sat on the coffee table and drew his feet up with him to sit in a more simplistic lotus position. "To get the deets on our drama?"

"Naw," Kenny replied. "I told you why I came. Kyle was — "

"Worried about me. Right. Got it. Now, if you're done straight-up lying to my face — "

"Stan, I'm not kidding." His serious tone was borderline out of place, and the use of his name caused Stan to turn his head and look at Kenny directly. His friend's expression was relaxed and nothing but casual, though there was something emotional in the way his brows were furrowed just the slightest. "Kyle sat with us for lunch today. It was weirdly normal, too, like nothing weird had happened yesterday *at all*, even though he literally spent the night in the hospital — "

"He *what*?" Stan sputtered. His body twisted and he held himself up with his elbow. Kenny quirked a brow.

"He spent the night in the hospital. The nurse was concerned because he fainted, so she called his dad and his dad took him to the ER," Kenny explained. "I mean, he's totally fine. Like I said, he was absolutely normal today, the doctors just wanted to keep him overnight to make sure he ate and all that lovely stuff."

Stan's head began to reel, and a vague dizziness surfaced. "Make sure he ate?" he asked. "Why *wouldn't* he eat?"

To that, Kenny only shrugged. "Beats me, dude," he said. Kenny sniffed, and then rubbed his nose against his arm like it was itchy. Considering he wasn't getting emotional, Stan wouldn't be surprised if it was. "I haven't figured that out yet, and he's not exactly keen on talkin' about it at all, y'know? I dunno, I don't get it, but when I asked him when he last ate, he said — and I quote — '*I don't know*'."

The dizziness intensified, and Stan forced himself back down onto the couch. He dragged his hands across his face, trying to process what he'd just heard. So that was why Kyle wasn't in seventh period yesterday. He'd been in the hospital, recovering from — low blood sugar, or

whatever, and while he'd been dealing with something that probably could have killed him, Stan had been making drug deals with Craig Tucker in the back alcove of the school and having disturbingly rocky mental breakdowns. *You're guilty*, his brain resurfaced. *How pathetic.*

"Um... anyway, he's fine," Kenny piped up again. "And he sat with us, and when you didn't show up, he pulled me outside practically by the ear and asked me where the hell you were."

"No." Stan's voice surprised even himself. His throat scratched against itself, giving his tone a particular growl that was definitely foreign. He withdrew his hands from his face and forced himself to sit up. "No, okay, no. Here's where that doesn't make any fucking sense."

Stan looked at Kenny, and Kenny looked at Stan.

"Kyle hates me, he wouldn't want me around him," Stan said. "You were there yesterday, did you see the way he reacted when I was trying to help him? He was practically screaming at me to get the hell away."

Kenny pressed his lips together firmly into a thin line. Then, he spoke. "Why would he hate you?"

Frustration exploded in Stan's chest. He heaved forward off of the couch, leaping into a standing position to pace. An agitated noise clawed its way out of his lungs. "I hid drugs in his room, okay?" he snapped. He curled his fingers through his still-damp hair. The familiar, short-of-breath feeling returned. "I hid drugs in his room, and —"

Stan paused to draw in a breath.

"— he found out, and I called him, and he screamed at me —"

You're pathetic.

"— I tried to apologize to him *so many times*," Stan heaved all of his breath out at once, grabbing at the fabric of his graphic tee. It bunched between his fingers, a cracking decal smooth under his fingers. His free hand gripped the back of the couch, which he hadn't realized he'd walked around. "Him being mad at me is fucking me up so bad."

Another breath.

"It hurt —"

Don't talk to me. I don't want to look at you.

"And, what, apparently it's all fixed now?" Stan didn't know where his words were coming from at this point. It was an endless well, toppling over him and surrounding him with the dirty waters of honesty that he didn't want to face. "Who does he think he is, playing with my fucking *feelings like that?*"

When Stan looked up, he saw Kenny's expression was eerily calm. It pissed him off.

“I broke up with Wendy for him,” Stan muttered, more to himself than anything. Just that acknowledgment was enough to threaten his newfound security — not that there was very much of it, anyway. He combed his fingers back through his hair, still absentmindedly fidgeting with the decal on his shirt.

“He told you to break up with Wendy?” Kenny asked.

“No, of course not, he had no idea I was going to break up with her,” Stan replied. “I didn’t realize I was going to, either, but then we almost had sex and I just couldn’t do that anymore.”

“Wait, wait — ” Kenny lifted his hands, pushing at the air like he was ushering for a stop. In a way, he was; Stan acquiesced although he really didn’t feel comfortable doing so. “Who did you almost have sex with? Wendy, or Kyle?”

“Wendy,” Stan clarified. But then, he shook his head. “Well, Kyle, too — but that was last week, and we didn’t *almost* have sex, technically, even though Kyle told me he wanted me to — ”

Stan forced himself to shut up. He had shared too much.

“Whatever. My point is, I cheated on Wendy, and when I realized I liked Kyle more than her, I broke up with her and tried to tell Kyle, but then *apparently* Kyle found the drugs I stashed in his room, and he’s... I don’t know, he won’t listen to me, he won’t hear me out.” With a huff, Stan wandered around the other end of the couch. He collapsed into it and melted into the cushions, his neck craned against the backrest. “It’s torture just to get him in the same room as me.”

Stan fell silent. Kenny wasn’t saying anything, either, and the room’s only noise was the distant rumble of the fridge buffering and humming in the kitchen.

“Unless I’m drunk, apparently, because when I went to text him I saw that I ended up sending him, like, fifty drunk messages, and apparently he came over the other night?” Stan reached up and dug his fingers into his scalp, trying to force himself into remembering something substantial. Maybe just one thing, that would reveal a motive behind Kyle’s distance. Was it really all from the weed, or had he done something else monumentally stupid? Had he done something irreparable while he was drunk? He made a loud, frustrated noise. “Just fucking end me now.”

The light that forced itself through the window burst into his eyes all at once when he finally sat up normally. He was caught by the vision of his friend. Kenny’s elbow rested on his knee, and his chin rested in his palm. His free hand was rolling the dog tags against the chain, creating a sharp clipping sound. “No one’s going to end you, Stan — *including* yourself,” he said. Then, he smiled, his teeth visible in a strangely sympathetic expression. “Have you thought about going to therapy?”

For some reason, that didn’t settle well with Stan. The idea just felt inherently wrong. “Therapy?” he muttered back, furrowing his brows and curling his upper lip. “You’re kidding.”

“Naw, dude, I’m totally serious,” Kenny replied. “It works wonders for plenty of people — god knows it helps me.”

“You could afford therapy?” Stan snorted.

“Psh, no. I see my counselor regularly, though, and she’s pretty much my free therapist at this point,” answered Kenny. He dropped his dog tags and lifted his head from his palm. “Look, man, I’m not gonna lie and say it’s a quick fix, or it’s going to help you without the possibility of failure, or whatever, but what I *will* say is it does help. Just having someone who will let you talk about whatever you want for an hour or so once a week can really relieve stress.”

Kenny uncrossed his legs and stood. He lifted his arms up above his head, stretching himself. His spine popped in response, and he sighed in a quiet relief.

“I know therapy isn’t thought of as cool, or whatever the hell, but, like... I wouldn’t bring it up if I didn’t think it’d help, y’know?” Kenny’s words seemed to have finished at that point, and he dropped his arms back down to his sides. His posture was a hell of a lot better than Stan’s, and Stan felt kind of weird about the fact that he actively noticed that. He shook his head and turned his gaze towards Kenny’s face.

“Sounds complicated. Can you be my therapist?” Stan asked. This earned a slightly wider grin from Kenny.

“I’m here for you whenever you need to talk, man, but I’m not a professional yet,” Kenny told him. Stan felt his mouth turn downward. Kenny’s own expression fell. “Look, just promise me you’ll think about it? If all else fails, I can be your sit-in shrink. Sound good?”

Stan paused to think and breathe. He was unsure of the collective merit Kenny’s words held, but he held points that Stan found virtually irrefutable. People went to therapy all the time. His mother had gone to therapy once upon a time, he knew that much, and so had Wendy. But he’d never talked to them about it before. It had always just been a thing that people did, and Stan never really felt like he *deserved* it. Sure, he’d seen psychologists and shit before, that’s how he got those stupid pills in the first place. To regularly go to therapy, however? That was an entirely new animal. The idea of opening up to someone he didn’t know was unsettling.

The result was a relent nonetheless.

“Fine,” Stan said. Kenny’s grin widened further.

“Good,” he replied. He lifted his arms up, then, outstretching them like he was pretending to be an airplane. Stan quirked a brow. Kenny rolled his eyes. “Get up here, man, it’s hug time.”

That idea wasn’t comfortable. “Um,” uttered Stan. “Do we have to?”

“It’s imperative. C’mon. Hug me.”

“Okay, but what if we don’t do that,” Stan suggested.

The suggestion didn't last long, because Kenny wasted no time in taking control of the situation. He stepped toward Stan and leaned down, wrapping his arms around him like this was going to be the last time they ever saw each other. Kenny's hugs were always enthusiastic — they were rare, but when they showed up, he didn't half-ass them. With his arms squished to his sides, Stan had a bit of an issue with the return of the sentiment. Even so, Stan had to admit he found the contact enjoyable. His lack of mobility resulted in him just grabbing onto Kenny's tank top.

Kenny smelled of cigarettes and something else that Stan was dangerously familiar with. It was intoxicating.

“Hey, Kenny?” Stan muttered, breathing in the comforting familiarity.

“Yeah, bro?”

Stan closed his eyes. “I need a favor.”

Chapter End Notes

next update to be posted on wednesday (november 28th)!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Backup Plan

Chapter Summary

He ducked into the alcove and looked around for signs of life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next morning, Stan was awake. He felt like shit, but he was awake, which was a large step in the right direction. Immobility no longer ate at the foundations of his bones, nor did it chew the soft tissues of his lungs. He could breathe, and he could blink, and he could see — however, the most important thing of all may just have been the fact that he could move.

He rolled himself out of bed at around six forty, which was more than enough time to get ready for school. His normal wake-up was in twenty minutes, and how happy would his mom be if she found out he had the motivation to get himself out of bed so much earlier than normal? The secret of his wakefulness, of course, was something significantly less appetizing than the simple concept of an earlier bedtime. In fact, he had not allowed himself a bedtime at all, but that was beside the point. It was an interesting take, he considered as he gathered up a new outfit for the day from his dresser. He wondered if it was a bad thing that the only way he could wake up in the morning was by not sleeping in the first place. Ultimately, though, he refused to let himself care.

Stan didn't shower so much as he rinsed. He scrubbed the grime off using the bare minimum of soap, and simply rinsed yesterday out of the strands of his hair. The dryness caused his palms to grit painfully through what felt like a significant increase in the amount of tangles, though he forced his fingers between the knots without paying much mind to whether it was actually a legitimate strategy. In the search for his razor, he found it on the edge of the sink. That was, perhaps, the most eventful part of his shower: opening the door and reaching for the razor precariously so he could shave.

Drying was second nature, and finished quickly. He brushed his teeth twice, because something inside of him told him to overcompensate. The rest was tiring busywork. Get dressed: tug on underwear, button up pants, slip on shirt, toss on pair of socks, bury himself in sweater. Somewhere along the way, he became sidetracked by a differential detail. He lost time — minutes, at most, though just how *many* minutes exactly was up for debate. The only thing he knew for certain was that he had a strangely limited amount of time to get downstairs, and a gap of time in which he found himself remembering nothing. Distress began to scratch at the skin of his collar.

So, with no qualms about his decision, Stan searched for the Toolshed outfit he'd since replaced in his closet. He unfolded it, unclipped the belt that held it all together, and

withdrew the prized possession that he'd been saving for a time exactly like this. The flask was old and dented, and it gleamed in the dull light of his bedroom. Times like these were why he was thankful for people like Kenny — empathic and helpful almost to a fault. He told himself he hadn't technically manipulated anyone in order to get this. It was his silence on the topic which convinced Kenny, not his words.

When Stan had first asked for the alcohol, Kenny had adamantly refused. Everyone knew his past with the stuff, considering they were all around for that particularly grisly portion of his life. Stan wasn't entirely sure, in all admission, *what* had caused Kenny to remember, but something had triggered it. Maybe it was an expression, or maybe just a passing thought. Whatever it was, it caused Kenny to ask him a slew of questions relating to his recent consumption. *Have you had any recently? How much did you have? When did you resume? Are you reliant again?* From there, it didn't take much. Just the odd shrug, or the strategically placed silence. And then Kenny had left, and when he came back, it was with a flask about the size of his hand and a cautionary "*only* when you need it" on his lips.

Even as he stared at the metal container, Stan refused to even consider the fact that he'd become something despicable.

He unscrewed the cap and lifted his head back, just enough for a small sip. Before he even swallowed the contents, he'd already replaced everything. The cap was screwed on, the flask was wrapped in the shirt, the belt was buckled, and the package was buried into one of the darkest corners of his closet. The amount he'd taken was teasing, and it screamed from inside of his stomach to drink more (more more more), but he refused to give that insatiable voice that much power. Nonetheless, it was *just enough* for him to get through the day without feeling on the verge of strangling someone. It was *just enough* to keep him from the pain that would result from going without.

Stan did not eat breakfast that morning. He knew he probably should, but his stomach simply didn't feel capable of keeping anything substantial down. The booze was enough to keep him steady (logically, however, he knew the opposite was true). He'd hardly kicked on his shoes and thrown on his backpack when he felt the telltale buzz of the phone he'd forgotten was still in his pocket. He dug it out as he left home, trailing down his usual path to school and squinting at the poorly-lit screen of his phone.

KYLE

Today 07:21

Meet me behind the school.

Stan's heart throbbed in his chest when he saw it. All of the messages that had come before it were enough of a telltale, even without looking at the name. He came to a stop at first, his feet scratching at a crack in the sidewalk. His house was just a few feet behind him. The urge to run and hide was suddenly present, but he refused to listen to it. His brain told him not to go. *He'll just hurt you. He just wants to yell at you. Don't even give him the time of day. Just move on.*

His footsteps were heavy against the cement. He narrowly avoided patches of ice and blots of snow, which had started to melt in the warmth of the morning. Scenery passed by him, which Stan blatantly ignored. He had one goal. Well, two — but that was beside the point.

Just like last time, it was like he'd been flicked to autopilot. He didn't realize where he'd chosen to go until he ended up there, his eyes staring at the rusting corners of the metal door that lead to the back of the school. Images of the dumpster swept through his head, and thoughts of Craig and Tweek came back. That reminded him, he still needed to get the hundred bucks so he could buy the LSD. As much as he told himself he wasn't going to regularly buy from Craig, he also didn't want to be blocked off because he didn't make the week he'd sort-of-not-really promised.

With a steeled heart, Stan approached and shoved the door open. His hand hurt from where it had bumped the corner of the metal push handle, but he couldn't bring himself to care about it. Being back outside, even though he hardly realized he'd gone *inside* of the school in the first place, constructed a certain blindness. Stan squinted to see properly as his eyes adjusted. The large door fell shut behind him.

"He's here!"

Stan looked over to where the voice had come from, and found himself all-too shocked to find Kenny. His parka was back on, and it was almost strange to see it after yesterday. His hood was up, too, though it wasn't buttoned. His face was visible. Kenny peeked out of the alcove, leaning from between the dumpsters.

"What?" came another voice. Stan recognized it immediately. Kenny didn't respond to Kyle, however. He simply ushered Stan quickly into the alcove with a wave of his hand. Although a little hesitant, Stan followed. He ducked into the alcove and looked around for signs of life. His heart squeezed uncomfortably when he saw Kyle really *was* there. His green ushanka, faded from years of use, stood out starkly against the collection of bricks he stood in front of. He leaned against the back wall of the school, his spine hunched forward as he scrubbed his arms for warmth. He wore his usual winter coat, but even that didn't seem to be enough.

When Kyle looked up, he froze.

"What the hell — what is *Stan* doing here?" he snapped, his posture straightening out immediately. He made long, fast strides to approach Stan, who backed up when Kyle showed no signs of stopping. Kyle finally halted, hardly six inches away. Kyle had puffed out his chest, and his shoulders were squared. They might be the same size, but that didn't keep Stan from feeling like he was tiny. Kyle thrust his palm against the center of Stan's chest, pushing him. Stan's back hit the chain link fence. "What are *you* doing here? What is *wrong* with you? How many times do I have to tell you to leave me alone?"

"Dude — " Stan started. Kyle bristled immediately. He looked about ready to beat Stan into a pulp. Stan really didn't want to have to fight back. "You — "

"I *what*? What did *I* do to invite you to *stalk me*, you obsessive *freak*?" Kyle's words dug a hole into Stan's stomach. Absentmindedly, he gripped at the fence he was being threatened

against. He opened his mouth to respond, but no sound came out. His throat refused to move, and his voice refused to appear. This only served to anger Kyle. “*Well?* Spit it out!”

“You texted me,” Stan finally sputtered. “You — you told me to meet you here, I didn’t even — I just — ”

Kyle’s brows furrowed. “I texted you?” he hissed. His gaze lowered, his eyes moving as he scanned his brain for the memory. “I didn’t...”

He took a step back, spinning effectively on his heel to face Kenny, who had since squirmed most of the way out of the alcove. Stan, still paralyzed with the lingering fear of being hit by someone he loved, could only watch as Kyle sped towards Kenny. He lurched to grab and pull him back into the alcove, but Kenny had successfully escaped. There was a distinct, loud scraping noise as Kenny shoved the dumpster back against the wall. They were effectively blocked in — no, they were *literally* blocked in.

“You bastard!” Kyle shouted, hitting the wall with his fist. “I give you my phone *once* and *this is what you do?* ”

Finally, Stan managed to find his voice. “Kenny,” he called, letting go of the chain link. He approached, though kept his distance from Kyle. “Kenny, let us out.”

“Nope!” Kenny replied. His tone was nothing if not cheeky. “Y’all gotta get yourselves out of this one using *teamwork*.”

“Teamwork? *Teamwork?*” Kyle fumed. “You barricaded our only exit! We can’t get out unless you *pull it away!* ”

“Actually, I could hoist you up,” Stan suggested.

The face Kyle made was more than enough for Stan to back off. “Oh, *hell* no! You’re not coming *near* me,” Kyle hissed. Stan raised his hands up in surrender; Kyle turned back to the dumpster. “You think we’ve forgiven each other? We can’t *cooperate* without that! We haven’t forgiven each other!”

Oh, thought Stan, narrowing his gaze. *So this is a ‘we’ thing, now?*

“Guess you better start forgivin’, then!” was all Kenny said. Quiet, rhythmic footfalls sounded just outside the alcove, and faded until they fell absolutely silent. There was another loud, metallic squeak, and then a slam — both of the boys in the alcove knew *exactly* what that noise entailed.

“Kenny! Kenny, get the *fuck back here!*” This time, Kyle crashed his fist against the back of the dumpster. There was a significantly muffled throb of a noise that resulted. Before long, Kyle had started to heave at the corner of the dumpster with his shoulder. When it didn’t budge, Stan approached to help out. He didn’t get that far, though, as Kyle noticed immediately and threw a fiery glare at him. “Back the fuck up! I can do this on my own!”

Stan, frustrated, backed up. He dropped his backpack onto the ground and threw his hands into the air. He quit. Kyle *obviously* wasn't willing to do anything even close to being in the same general area as Stan. There was no way he could help with Kyle being so fucking stubborn about it all. And, honestly? Whatever. Stan didn't give a fuck. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the brick wall of the school, listening to the quiet grunts and shouts of his (apparently) ex-friend.

Needless to say, Kyle wasn't able to push the dumpster on his own. Kenny must have put something in the way of the corner, or perhaps there was just something that caught it and refused to let it go. Maybe he'd found a lock. Whatever the means, they were stuck, and they would continue to be stuck until Kyle got the stick out of his ass and let Stan boost him over the damned dumpster.

Stan didn't look over when Kyle finally gave up. He didn't look over when he heard the telltale growl of anger, nor did he look over when he heard him sit down where he'd been standing. Stan was fine where he was, simply staring at the field which stretched beyond the chain link fence they were stuck behind. Far in the distance, he could see a group of kids playing kickball.

"I'm sorry," said Kyle, and that was what startled Stan out of his calm. He turned his head, his eyebrows raised at the notion of an apology. Something in his heart fluttered, but he quashed it down before it could get too hopeful. Kyle was curled in on himself, a little over five feet away from Stan. Kyle's own back was pressed to the brick wall, and his knees were pulled up to his chest. His gaze had turned reluctant, and his voice reflected that. He picked at a loose piece of gravel. "Y'know, for getting in your face earlier, and... calling you an obsessive freak."

"It's fine," Stan replied. "I understand."

"Good," Kyle muttered.

And Stan repeated, "good."

Quiet rolled over the top of the alcove. It blanketed them like clouds which blocked the sun and refused the feeling of health that came from light. Stan swallowed.

"I'm sorry, too," Stan said, his arms loosening from where he had them crossed. "For... everything."

Kyle said nothing.

"Can we talk about it?" Stan tried. "Please? I mean, while we're locked in here, could we at least *try*? Can I at least explain?"

The wind picked up. It blew through the stenciled fence. Polygons of air swept through the alcove and threatened to freeze sections of Stan's still damp hair. He regretted not bringing his hat along with him — he hadn't worn it since Monday. Even so, he knew exactly where he'd left it.

Kyle cleared his throat, and Stan tried to keep his gaze unwaveringly focused on him.

“You don’t need to explain,” Kyle said then, his overall posture relaxing. Stan felt the need to argue — of *course* he needed to explain. The idea that Kyle wasn’t willing to listen angered him. He wasn’t in the mood for dealing with someone who thought they knew everything. But then, Kyle continued. “You already have.”

Stan frowned. Kyle glanced over, but quickly averted his gaze again.

“I don’t know how much you remember, because you were pretty hammered,” began Kyle, “but I came over the night you got drunk, and... you said a lot of things. You wouldn’t shut up, dude, and there was so much...”

Kyle coughed quietly into his elbow, then sniffled in the cold. Stan wanted to lend him his warmth, but he knew that wouldn’t end well.

“I didn’t know how to process, I guess, and I still don’t,” Kyle added. “I was still really hurt about what you did, and then to find out your parents split up, and you broke up with Wendy? I didn’t know how I was supposed to feel about any of it.”

The moment after he finished talking was once again full of silence. Stan felt like the situation deserved a moment of processing, even if he knew what he would say clearly. “I...” Stan cut off, unsure. Suddenly, the overwhelming urge to ask questions about that night — the night he’d relapsed — burrowed into his mind. He wanted to know, wanted to make sure he hadn’t done anything ridiculous, or dumb, but he knew it wasn’t the time to talk about that. Besides, he didn’t feel strong enough to tackle that monster right then. He restarted what he’d planned on saying. “I’m sorry you had to deal with my shit. You don’t deserve it — and I’m sorry for hiding drugs in your room. I’m sorry you got in trouble.”

“Dude, it isn’t about that.” Stan’s eyes widened at that, but he said nothing. Kyle obviously wasn’t done. Their eyes met, Kyle’s cheeks stained ruddy in the cold. “It isn’t about the drugs, or the fact that I got in trouble — it *never* was. I couldn’t care less about that, I can handle it. The thing that hurt me was the fact that you didn’t trust me.”

“Of course I trusted you,” blurted Stan. “I always did — ”

“No,” Kyle interrupted. He lowered his legs down from his chest, now sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him. The heels of his palms dug into the ground. “No, you didn’t. If you did, you would have told me about what was going on, and I could have helped you. I could have *helped* you, Stan, don’t you get it?”

More wind. More quiet. The warning bell rang inside the school. “But — ” Stan, left reeling, struggled to find a way to continue. “But you said — ”

“I know,” said Kyle. “I know what I said, but I was angry, and I wasn’t thinking straight.”

The corners of Stan’s lips tugged downward without him realizing it. A burning feeling sprouted in the base of his jaw, curling around his teeth and tongue. He turned his head away from Kyle, subconsciously unable to continue the eye contact. It was too much. It was too

intense. Scratching could be heard, and he suddenly felt Kyle's presence closer. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the distance between them shorten from five feet to three.

"If this is going to work," Kyle whispered, his voice stagnant in the air, "if you and I are going to keep being friends, you're going to have to trust me."

Stan replied with, "okay."

"You know what that means, right?" Kyle asked. The question was rhetorical, of course, for he continued anyway. "You can't keep things bottled up inside, and you have to talk to me about what's going on in your life. We haven't gotten this far by keeping secrets from each other."

The words sounded bitter, coming from Kyle's mouth in a reluctant stream. He'd always been well-spoken. He'd been on the speech team in freshman and sophomore year. Stan had heard him perform; he'd heard him discuss, he'd heard him debate. It wasn't difficult to notice that something, very small and minuscule, had been left missing from his tone. Stan didn't feel a lot, but one thing he did feel in that moment was hopeless. He wondered if Kyle was really willing to forgive him, or if this might actually be it. Furthermore, it felt ridiculous to even consider such a thing. Stan's eyes burned, and he pinched the bridge of his nose to keep from embarrassing himself.

"Are you okay?" Kyle asked. Stan, unwilling to talk about what was on his mind, only nodded.

"You're going to have to trust me, too," said Stan, finally lowering his hand. He looked at Kyle firmly — as firmly as he could manage, with his eyes still threatening to water. "You have to talk to me, too."

Kyle flashed a disingenuous habit of a smile. "I know."

That disingenuous habit of a smile was returned by Stan. Both of their expressions faded at the same time, until they were just looking at each other. "So, is this it?" Stan asked. "Are we back to normal?"

"No," said Kyle. "This isn't it, and we aren't back to normal. I don't think so, at least — I still need time to process... everything. And, I think you might, too."

Stan was silent. Kyle turned away.

"But — this... thing, this... whatever, that messed us up? This isn't the end, okay? I don't want it to be the end," Kyle admitted. He sniffed again, and Stan was reminded of Craig. Such thoughts only served to ruin his mood. Then, there was a crack in Kyle's voice, and he was suddenly speaking louder than his previous whisper. "I'm exhausted of being mad at you."

Stan snapped to attention, hearing the telltale waver of someone who was on the verge of tears. But Kyle, stoic in all of his stubborn glory, showed no outward signs of breaking down. His posture remained straight, and his gaze continued in a sturdy examination of his legs. Air

collected in front of him visibly. Stan lifted his hand to rub Kyle's back, but stopped short. He moved to withdraw completely.

Kyle caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, and snorted. "You can touch me, you know," he said. "I'm not gonna break."

"I know," Stan replied. He forced himself to smile. "But you might snap."

Kyle laughed.

Stan allowed himself to place a hand on his friend's shoulder. He squeezed firmly. It felt like a step in the right direction, just being able to touch Kyle so simply. He was still afraid, of course. He feared that this might just be temporary. That this goodness that they'd managed to conjure would shatter in a moment's notice. Of course, he couldn't help but wonder just how much of that was unfounded anxiety. Stan's brain was broken into pieces and parts, and each of those pieces and each of those parts wanted something different. He didn't know who to listen to.

But that, in the moment — contact, human physical contact — it felt like a reassurance. Like a pat on the back from someone he looked up to, telling him *good job, I'm proud of you, and everything is going to be okay*.

The bell for the start of class rang. They'd been gifted six minutes of freedom, and those six minutes were over. Such a thing became apparent when Kyle gave Stan a smile and shrugged off his hand. Kyle stood, adjusting his jacket as he did. Then, he turned to Stan and held out his hand. His jacket sleeve slid up. His forearm was wrapped in an elastic bandage. Stan tried to ignore it; Kyle must have just hurt his arm somehow. "What are we doing?" Stan asked, taking Kyle's hand. Kyle pulled him up.

"You," said Kyle, his grasp lingering just a moment too long on Stan's fingers, "are going to give me a boost."

Kyle gestured with his now free hand, jabbing a thumb in the direction of the dumpster that Kenny had creatively used to trap them. It raised just barely high enough in the air to keep them from being able to climb on their own, without help. Stan nodded, and with the affirmation, they both strode to the dumpster with confidence. Stan turned his back to the dumpster. He laced his fingers together and kept himself steady, getting down on one knee. Kyle grabbed onto Stan's shoulders, and placed his shoe in the makeshift foothold Stan had created with his hands. He glanced down.

"You okay there?" Kyle asked.

"All good," Stan confirmed.

"Alright." Kyle looked up, contemplating the distance that he would need to hoist. He drew in a deep breath, tightened his grip on Stan's shoulders, and adjusted his stance just a little bit. "On the count of three?"

"On the count of three," replied Stan.

“Okay. One...” began Kyle.

“Two...” continued Stan.

And then, together: “Three!”

Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be posted on wednesday (december 5th)!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Like Father

Chapter Summary

He really should have slept last night.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Stan ended up taking the bus home that afternoon. The temperature had dropped significantly since that morning, and he wasn't willing to risk another exacerbation of his asthma just for the sake of exercise. Maybe he would have walked if he'd brought his inhaler that morning, but he hadn't. He didn't remember taking it out of his backpack, but then again, it wasn't the strangest thing to have disappear. His backpack had always been like a black hole for all of the things that were necessary. The door was unlocked when he arrived home, like always. He didn't think as he entered.

"I'm home," Stan called out experimentally into his house. The door closed loudly behind him. He wasn't entirely sure what he was expecting, honestly. He was very obviously home alone. Since his father had left, only his mother remained in their household, and she worked until at least six in the evening.

"Huh? Oh, welcome home, Stan."

Stan dropped his backpack onto the ground with a loud tumble of a noise. It felt a little dramatic, but he couldn't help it. He'd been sincerely surprised; he wasn't expecting anyone to be home, and he especially wasn't expecting the person who answered to be home.

The closer Stan looked, the more obvious it was that Randy would be here. His coat was hung up on the rack, and his wallet and keys had been placed on the coffee table. Even his shoes were by the door, which were less than a foot away from where Stan stood. The light in the kitchen was on, and he could just barely see his father's arm from around the wall. Hesitant, Stan kicked off his shoes. Such an action was simply for nicety sake; he didn't plan on staying for long, but his mom would freak if she saw he'd trailed mud and leaves into the house. He slowly approached the kitchen, and peeked around the doorway.

Sure enough, there he was. At the kitchen table, Randy sat with a bowl of cereal in front of him, reading a newspaper like it was still seven in the morning. It was folded on the table in front of him, perched in his left hand. His right held a spoon, which was full of slightly soggy Cheerios. Stan forced himself not to be distracted by the food, and sat opposite his father at the kitchen table.

Stan hadn't planned this, but it was admittedly rather perfect. His plan before had been a lot more difficult to navigate. He found it strange that everything seemed to be falling into place

in a virtual perfection. After a moment of simply watching, Stan finally cleared his throat. In response, Randy looked up from the paper and stopped mid-crunch on his cereal. When Stan said nothing, Randy chanced a glance back at the paper — which Stan took as his final motivator.

“Can I borrow some cash?” asked Stan. He’d been nervous about asking, but now that he’d gotten it over with, it felt almost too easy. He watched Randy blink, and then slowly chew. Tension formed between them. It wasn’t stiff; it was simply awkward. Randy swallowed.

“How much?”

“I dunno, like...” Stan paused to think, his brows furrowing down a bit. He didn’t really need to think, of course. He’d been thinking the logistics of this out all day. He barely managed to pay attention in final period. He finally glanced up, watching his father’s expression carefully as he said, “two hundred?”

“Two hundred?” replied Randy. His expression didn’t read surprise, though. Not from what Stan could see, at least. “What for?”

“Drugs,” Stan answered. That was when Randy’s expression became firm.

“Now, Stan,” he said, gesturing towards Stan with his spoon, “you know how your mother feels about drugs.”

A pause.

“And how I feel about drugs,” his father continued quickly, “because we feel the same way. About drugs.”

Stan ignored the urge to call him out on his bullshit. Doing so would just waste energy that he didn’t have. Crawling into bed sounded like a fantastic idea, and sleeping sounded heavenly. He’d gone for over twenty-four hours without sleeping, and he could feel himself reaching the phase where everything started to melt together like he was watching things through ice. Or, where he felt like he was high. He had to fight the urge not to start laughing at how ridiculous it all was. He distracted himself visually with a drop of milk that seemed to be having trouble falling off of the tip of the spoon.

He really should have slept last night.

“I won’t tell her if you won’t,” Stan said, forcing himself to look at Randy. He purposefully avoided eye-contact, though. Looking at him properly would be too much for his overwhelmed brain to handle. Instead, Stan looked at the bridge of his father’s nose. He could barely see Randy furrow his brows.

“Stan, no.” Randy finally pulled the spoon back and dropped it into the bowl. It clinked. The newspaper crinkled in his hand as he set it down, the edges he’d been pinning down slowly separating. “Why do you want to buy drugs, anyway?”

Stan couldn't help the retort that escaped his mouth. "I'm going to sell them for twice as much and profit. Christ, Dad, I'm going to take them, because I want to get high." And then, when he figured that might have come off a little snarky, he backpedaled. "I mean... I want to experiment a little — just a little."

Randy did not look convinced. Stan drew in a breath.

"Please?" he started, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He rubbed the palms of his hands against his thighs, as if to dry them, though they weren't wet. "It's not that big of a deal. I'm not, like, getting cocaine or heroin. It's just some LSD."

"Two hundred bucks for LSD?" Randy questioned, sitting up a bit straighter. He leaned on the kitchen table with his elbows. "My God, Stan, where the hell are you buying this shit from?"

"A trustworthy source," Stan said. He didn't know if that was the truth, of course. For all he knew, Craig could be the next big-time serial killer. He could spike his stock with dangerous chemicals, but — the way Craig had been so irked by the idea of NBOMe gave Stan the impression that he wouldn't do that. Granted, Stan had no idea what the hell an NBOMe was, but he had a feeling it wasn't great. He blinked away a haze from his eyes, trying to get himself to stay awake and alert. "Like, a really trustworthy source."

It was suddenly very, very quiet. Even the rumble of the refrigerator and the hum of the air conditioning unit was completely absent. It was just the two of them, father and son, sitting at the kitchen table discussing drugs. An inkling of regret and panic began to flood Stan's system. Had he overstepped? Did he misjudge the situation? What if Randy decided to tell Sharon? How much trouble would he be in *then*?

Stan bit his lower lip, worrying at the chapped skin of it. There was a stain on the table, and he scrubbed at it with the sleeve of his jacket. It crinkled and filled the room with a quiet static-like noise. Just the little bit of sound helped Stan feel a little bit more grounded. From there, he was able to convince himself that it didn't matter. The risk was worth the reward — besides, if he got in trouble for this, so what? He'd be grounded for a bit? He'd gone through worse. He could handle worse. The most grievous thing that could result from getting in trouble would be him not being able to get the LSD, or any other drugs, for that matter. (Panic flooded through him at a higher rate, at that thought, but he ignored it.)

"Your mom talked to me about the weed," Randy finally said. The way he said it was scary. In that moment, Stan knew — he just *knew* — that his mom had told Randy about everything he'd confessed to. It didn't take long for Randy to start talking again. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

It had felt like hours passed, though Stan knew fully well that it had only been a few minutes. He'd started to rub his palms over the outsides of his thighs again, unintentionally focusing much of his attention on the fabric of his pants. Denim against his palms felt really shitty, but he forced himself to bear it. "If I wasn't sure, I wouldn't be asking," Stan finally said. A spot on the back of his neck began to hurt, and he reached up to soothe the ache. Rubbing it only made it hurt more, though, and he slowly lowered his hand back down to his lap. One look at Randy was enough for Stan to realize he wasn't budging. His dad — the same guy who had

given himself *cancer* to get high — was firm in his stance, apparently, and that fucked Stan up more than anything. Stan bit harder on the skin of his lip, hardly wincing when he hit the spot that had been split by Craig, even if it was still tender. On a whim, he blurted, “the LSD won’t cost the entire two hundred. I can use the rest to buy you beer.”

Randy’s brow twitched. He glanced around the kitchen, like he was expecting to see someone watching them. Stan immediately felt a hope flicker in his chest as he watched his father’s demeanor shift. The moment of quiet was overwhelmingly long, and Stan’s anxiety multiplied tenfold before Randy looked him in the eyes, pulled the bowl of cereal closer to him, and said, “make it wine, and you got a deal.”

Relief exploded in Stan’s entire body like fireworks. It lit up the muscles in his arms, and made his shoulders and hands shake from the lingering adrenaline. Shit. Shit. *Shit*, he just *did that*. Holy *fuck*. Did he just make a deal with his Dad so he could buy drugs? Did he just double-deal? Of course he had, Randy had said so himself. Stan almost gaped at everything suddenly hitting him at once. He didn’t feel excited about it quite yet, but he could tell he’d be shaking with it soon. He watched, stunned and paralyzed, as Randy began to finish off his bowl of cereal. He’d picked up the paper again, and he’d begun to read like none of this had happened at all. It was a massive mind-fuck, and for a moment, Stan literally had to question whether or not it had actually happened. Did he imagine it all? Had he passed out in the middle of the day? Was this just some really fucked up dream?

Stan pinched himself. It stung.

Slowly, he got to his feet, and pushed the chair back under the table. He ran his hand through his hair, and glanced towards the entry to the living room.

“My wallet’s on the coffee table,” Randy said through a mouthful of Cheerios. Stan nodded, and tried not to think as he left the kitchen.

He practically stumbled over to the coffee table, and he had to sit down on the couch before his body simply ceased functioning. His brain refused to process what had just happened. It had gone out the window. He was — gone. Was this a state of shock? More than likely, he mused to himself. His fingers shook and he struggled to open his father’s wallet. He stared at the money inside of it absently. His gaze rapidly flicked between the bills he could choose from. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, how much was two hundred again? How could he break this into the right amount of money? Stan felt his lungs squeeze, and he gasped quietly to himself. He had to put way too much effort into breaking two hundred dollars into logical chunks. It took him way too long to pull out two fifties, two twenties, four tens, and four fives. He practically dropped the wallet onto the coffee table with no regard for where it landed. His eyes wouldn’t stop staring at the money he held in his hand.

Stan had held more — much more — in his hands. He’d tote around money without issue, particularly when he was younger. There was something about being older, however, that made money feel a lot more valuable than it probably should have been. Just looking at it felt like too much. He couldn’t figure out if this was the right amount of money. Was this two hundred? This was two hundred. This was *definitely* two hundred. He counted more times than he could keep track of. He glanced at the clock, and slowly got to his feet. His legs were shaky beneath him, and he knew he would need to be careful to avoid tripping over anything

in the process of leaving. He folded the money carefully after counting it for a final time, and slid it into his jacket pocket. He kept his hand in that pocket, and he would always keep his hand in that pocket. He didn't trust himself enough not to lose it somehow in the ten minute walk from his house to Craig's.

Before Stan realized it, he'd walked back to the doorway of the kitchen. Randy had since finished eating, and he'd gotten up from the kitchen table. The bowl clinked when it was placed in the sink. "Hey, Dad?" Stan spoke up.

"Hm?" Randy grunted.

"Thanks."

"Uh huh." Another grunt. Stan nodded.

That was fine. He wasn't expecting much more than that.

Stan turned on his heel, and walked to the front door. He still felt a little numb and shaky, like he'd just woken up from a crazy deep sleep, but it wasn't nearly as intense as it had been just a minute ago. He slipped his shoes on carefully, making sure he kept steady on the foot he kept on the ground. He leaned on the wall with his free hand for support. He glanced outside. It had started to snow, somewhere between when he'd gotten home and now. Shit. The walk would suck. He'd need to bring his inhaler if he wanted to avoid pretty much dying out there — or, worse, dying at Craig's house. That wouldn't be good for anyone, and Craig probably wouldn't be too happy about that. Stan was struggling to keep his reputation up with the few people he interacted with as it was. He didn't want to fuck it up with a drug dealer, too.

He also didn't want to suffer the embarrassment of a full-blown asthma attack at Craig's house, either. That would suck pretty bad.

Stan darted up the steps and made his way to his room. His inhaler was still right where he'd left it on the floor, a few feet away from the foot of his bed. He picked it up and put it in his other pocket. Then, he thought better of it, and moved his inhaler to the same pocket the money was in. He could keep track of them both at once, that way, and if someone got suspicious of his goals with his hand in his pocket, he could just pull out his inhaler. Yeah. Smart.

Except for the fact that this whole thing was really stupid.

Should I do this?

The question fell on his shoulders like a ton of bricks. He scrubbed his fingers through his hair, suddenly very conscious about what he was doing, and what his body was doing, in the space that it took up. The closet caught his gaze, which reminded him of the Toolshed outfit, which just reminded him of the alcohol he had in there. He rubbed at his eyes with his free hand, trying to rid himself of the undeniable urge to say "fuck it" and drink the rest of what Kenny had given him. But then he could hear Kenny's voice saying *only when you need it*, and he couldn't bring himself to do it. Or, more accurately, he was able to stave off the urge.

The LSD might help. Craig had said that exact thing just the other day, when they were bartering and making deals in the stoner alcove behind the school. It might help give him a breakthrough in whatever bullshit he'd been wrestling. Stan's brain was paraphrasing, because he couldn't remember exactly what Craig had ended up saying, but it was all the same in the end. A really stupid thought passed his mind. Maybe the LSD could help him kick the addiction for good. He only entertained that thought for a moment, and then he tried to push it away.

But then it was back again, and he found himself consciously keeping the thought in the forefront of his mind. He left his room in a swarm of *maybes*, telling himself that the stupid thought he'd had was actually logical. It made him feel sick, though, because he knew very well that he was just trying to justify his actions. He wasn't comfortable enough with his own decisions to think his wants were innocent enough to be something along the lines of "*I just want to try it out*".

When he got back downstairs, his father was gathering his wallet and keys from the coffee table. Stan paid him very little mind, and simply made a beeline to the front door. He unlocked the door, and as an afterthought, he tossed his hood up over his head to block the wind from giving his ears and nose too much hell out in the freezing winter cold of Colorado. Stan reached for the door, but only managed to open it an inch before his father said one last thing.

"Stan, don't tell your mother about this."

Stan didn't look at Randy. He didn't need to. "I know, I won't," he said. He double-checked that the money and his inhaler were both safely tucked in his pocket, and opened the door the rest of the way. He shut the door carefully behind him as he exited out onto the front step.

The cold was immediate, but it wasn't nearly as bad as he'd thought it might be. Snow fell diagonally in the air from his right to his left. He didn't think much of it, until he realized that it would be blowing into his face as he walked. He made his way down the driveway, and when he got to the sidewalk, he turned right. The wind blew, and he felt almost suffocated by the intensity of it. He tipped his head downward out of instinct, gasping for breath. He refused to let the cold get the best of him. Not today.

Stan began to walk — quickly, and without thinking much about anything at all. He felt more than he thought, and with the snow, it was easy to think of nothing but the fact that he could feel it collecting in his hood. Eventually, he got fed up with that, and shoved his hood back down. The flakes made homes in his hair, and melted against the heat radiating from his scalp. It cooled his skin, but burned his cheeks.

"No, fuck you, wind," he told the air, slouching as he stormed down the sidewalk. If he hurried and played his cards right, he would easily be able to turn the ten minute walk into a seven — or even five — minute sprint to the finish line.

SURPRISE UPDATE NUMBER 2!

i told myself i wouldn't post this chapter early but im sad and have crappy impulse control lol

so the *next* update will be posted on wednesday (december 5th)!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Number the Galaxies

Chapter Summary

Stan nearly staggered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Through the evergreens that grew in the lawns, Stan could see the brown siding of Craig's house getting progressively closer. Although the color rivaled that of the bark surrounding him, he couldn't help but think of the door as a trophy. Along that same vein of thinking, of course, came the idea that he'd deserved it. His life thus far was almost certainly just practice for the event he faced, even if he didn't recognize the fact that he'd been running toward anything at all. Maybe it was just him being dramatic, but there was a certain finality to this that was almost frightening. At the same time, he felt undeniably excited. His brain kept asking him, *is this it? Is this it? Is this it?* And he wondered, among the thoughts and questions, if perhaps his brain knew something that the rest of him did not.

Stan darted up the snow-covered lawn of the Tucker residence and avoided spots of mud and dead grass. He hopped over the little garden-like area that separated the lawn from the sidewalk — which, in turn, connected the driveway and the cement steps leading to their door. His fingers jabbed the doorbell before he could let himself do a physical and mental check-in, and in a matter of seconds, he doubled over. He still refused to pull his hand out of his pocket, but his free hand rested against his knee as he struggled to catch his breath. He sucked cold, dry air in through his mouth, and forced it out quickly through his nose. He would check the time, but he'd forgotten to bring his phone, and he didn't wear a watch regularly. He barely heard the door open through his wheezing.

"Who the hell are you?" said a girl's voice. She sounded young — maybe twelve, around the same age as Ike. When Stan finally forced himself to stand upright again, he discovered that he was definitely incorrect. She stood at approximately his shoulders in height. Her posture, strong and definite, held an undeniable presence. She was more confident than Stan, by far. Her strawberry blond hair had been pulled back in twin pigtails, and she glared in an almost disturbingly skeptical way. Overall, she looked about fifteen. "What do you want?"

"I'm — " but Stan cut off, unable to hold his breath for long enough to speak a full sentence. He fought the urge to double back over. As quietly as he could, he took a breath. "I'm here to see Craig."

The girl's eyes narrowed as she scanned him up and down. A little uncomfortable with being looked over like that, Stan averted his gaze. He tried to avoid the urge to peek into the house behind her, because he knew that was rude. He looked back to her when she moved, crossing

her arms haughtily over her chest. She turned her head and looked over her shoulder into the living room. She uncrossed her arms and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Craig!” she called. “Some douchebag with a stupid coat is trying to break in!”

“What?” Stan sputtered. “I’m not — ”

“How stupid are we talking?” came Craig’s reply. It was distant, like it had come from the other side of the house. Stan heard some shuffling, too, and what sounded like paws on tile. The next time he spoke, he sounded louder. “Like, Boy George, or Vanilla Ice stupid?”

“Worse!” she replied.

There was a moment’s pause. “Richard Simmons?”

“No!” The girl looked back at Stan, then, apparently examining his coat for a proper analogy. Stan, admittedly a little self-conscious about the harassment of his coat, shoved his other hand into his pocket. He glanced down at his jacket, too. He didn’t think it was *that* bad. It was just a coat. He got it on sale at Kohl’s a couple years ago.

Holy shit, were they seriously getting to him about his *fucking jacket*?

He glanced up and caught a weird grin grow on her face. “More like Mark Zuckerberg on an off day.”

“Hey — ” but, once again, Stan was cut off by Craig.

“Yeah, that sounds bad,” said Craig, finally appearing from around one of the corners just past the living room. When he got just a few feet away from the door, he stopped walking. He looked at Stan, and Stan looked back at him. He didn’t know what he was expecting. Maybe for him to say something Craig-like, or whatever. Eventually he did speak, but it wasn’t at all what Stan was expecting. “Tricia, I have the same jacket.”

The girl — Tricia, apparently — said nothing to that. She simply spun on her heel and began on her way up the stairs. Craig flicked her off. The last thing she said before she disappeared was, “have fun, brother dearest!”

Stan drew in a breath, his lungs stubborn in their unwilling recovery. It hurt to force it. His grip tightened on the inhaler in his pocket. “Sisters,” Stan said, exhaling loudly, “am I right?”

Craig just stared at him for a moment. Stan watched him blink. And then, Craig said, “at least I don’t get beat up by mine.”

There it was — the shock of the statement sent Stan’s airways into a downward spiral of utter rejection. He coughed out all of the oxygen he’d managed to take in, and his throat suddenly felt extremely dry. He could feel a tightness begin to form under his ribs and in his sides, like the muscles in his chest were cramping. The coughing fit finished, and Stan forced himself to stand upright again. He was still breathing loudly, and he was almost overly aware of that.

“You’re wheezing,” Craig said, though it sounded more like he was talking to himself than anything else. Stan ignored that and tried to focus on taking in enough air to talk.

“Yeah,” he said. He took in another breath. “Could I sit down?”

Craig didn’t say anything. He just moved aside and gestured towards the couch. Stan entered and nodded to Craig gratefully, slowly lowering himself down to sit on the couch. The cushions were soft and let out a puff of air when he sat. He leaned over, trying to keep his torso as straight as possible to prevent more issues. Resting his elbow on his knee, he tried to figure out if he’d need his inhaler. He typically knew when he did and didn’t need to use it, but he was kind of bordering on it at this point. It didn’t feel too bad — he’d managed worse without any medicating, that was for sure, but that didn’t mean he wanted to underestimate it and accidentally pass out from lack of oxygen on Craig’s couch.

Then again, he *also* didn’t want to just pull out his inhaler in front of Craig. Stan wouldn’t say he was embarrassed of his asthma; he simply had a bit of an issue using his inhaler in front of people. It just felt awkward.

Stan closed his eyes. He could hear Craig slowly approach, and he could feel his presence just a few feet in front of him. “Pandora,” Craig called. Stan tried not to think about what the fuck a Pandora was. He was too preoccupied with other things at that moment. Fortunately for him, he wasn’t left not-guessing for long. He heard the telltale clacking of paws on tile again, and then the gentle, rapid footsteps of a dog approaching. Stan cracked his eyes open, and when he did, he saw a fluffy golden retriever. That confused Stan. He didn’t remember Craig having a dog. Craig asked, “asthma or anxiety?”

Stan rasped, “asthma.”

“Use your inhaler, moron.”

Stan just wheezed. Craig rolled his eyes.

“I’ll get you some water,” Craig said, and quickly disappeared into the kitchen. As soon as he was out of view, Stan withdrew his inhaler from in his pocket and pressed it to his mouth. The relief came quickly after using it. The tightening in his chest faded to just a dull ache, and he could breathe actual air into his lungs. Stan pocketed his inhaler once more. He sat up straight, pressing the heel of his palm against his thigh to prevent slouching. God, his legs were cold. Jeans weren’t very warm, were they? Stan rubbed both of his palms against his outer thighs, trying to warm up.

Not a second after he’d started rubbing at his legs, Pandora the golden retriever approached from his right side and hopped her front legs up and over his thighs. “Fuck — ” Stan cursed, massively unprepared for the sixty pounds of dog on his legs. He withdrew his hands from his thighs since her front legs were obstructing his ability to continue to rub them. At least she was warm. He nudged her gently in the side to get her to back off, but she didn’t budge. He frowned and tried again, but she remained. He sighed, relented, and instead decided to start petting her.

By the time Craig returned, Pandora had started to nudge her nose against Stan’s cheek and lick at his face with wild abandon. Stan couldn’t help but smile from the actions of the happy dog. It made him miss Sparky, though.

Stan tried to lean his head away from Pandora's licking, and she finally stopped. She hopped off of him when Craig approached, too. Stan drew in a breath at the return of feeling in his legs. He almost felt a little upset when she was no longer there to keep him company. He knew she wasn't his dog, but that lingering sadness was still there. His smile faded, and he was left just sitting there with a fading afterglow of dog kisses all over his cheeks. He wiped his face with his sleeve. Craig offered him the glass of water he'd left to get, and Stan took it with a quiet thanks.

"What are you here for, Marsh?" Craig asked when Stan was mid-drink. Stan swallowed and lowered the cup. He wondered how he should go about doing the thing. Craig's sister was upstairs, and he didn't know how soundproof the walls were. He was in a familiar predicament, and he found himself struggling to find the proper words to be as discrete as possible. Doubting himself, he didn't use words at all. Instead, he set the cup down on the wooden coffee table, and slowly pulled the money out of his pocket. Craig didn't react, which just made Stan think he didn't see it. He pulled it the rest of the way out, but before he could hold it up, Craig's arm shot out and pushed Stan's hand back down. Craig leaned down, whispering "dude, seriously? Seriously. At my house?"

"Well, where the fuck else am I supposed to find you?" Stan whispered back.

"At school," Craig hissed. "I don't do it here."

Stan rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like I was supposed to know that."

"Whatever, just put that away."

Stan couldn't help but frown. He was frustrated by the idea of coming so far only to be let down by the dealer, of all people. His father had been no problem, himself and his morals and everything that came with it had been fine, but when he was literally in the same house as the shit he came to buy? *That* was when he found a problem?

"Tricia!" Craig suddenly shouted. Stan's eyes widened. What the fuck was he doing?

"What!" Tricia responded loudly.

Stan spun around when he heard her start to thud down the stairs. She leaned over the banister, looked at the two of them, and pursed her lips like she was angry. From the limited interaction and experience Stan had with her, he honestly wouldn't be surprised if she was angry.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"We're out of treats," Craig said. He pointed at the front door. "Go get more."

Tricia made an agitated noise. "What? You go get more!"

"I have a guest, I can't."

Another agitated noise came from her, but this one was much more intense. She slid the rest of the way down the stairs and opened a door, gathering a white jacket in her arms and

sliding it on. She zipped up in a huff, and sat down to pull on her shoes. Stan looked away from her. He felt like he needed to act natural. In the moment, however, he did not know what acting natural would look like. Everything he knew about socialization fell right out the fucking window, and he was left speechless for what felt like an eternity, until —

“So, Pandora, huh? Like, the box?” Stan resisted the urge to face palm at his own question. Craig looked at him.

“No, like the galaxy cluster,” he answered.

Stan made a face. “The what?”

Craig was quiet, but something shifted in his eyes. In a flash, it was gone, and Craig simply said, “never mind.”

Pandora panted innocently at the other side of the coffee table, simply observing everything else that went on in the room where she lay. Stan felt a little guilty about his apparently shitty attempt at acting normal, and found himself slouching again in no time. Tricia left a few minutes later, grumbling under her breath about being the only one expected to do anything. Craig payed her no mind, but the mutterings from her left a bitter feeling in the back of Stan’s mind. He rubbed at his arms, trying to distract himself that way.

The panting stopped, and soon he found himself face-to-face with Pandora. She came from his left this time, since Craig was blocking his right, and poked his leg with her nose. Stan found that a little strange, and when he sat up a little straighter to figure out what she was doing, Pandora lifted her front legs onto his thighs, exactly the way she had before.

“Stop rubbing your arms, Marsh,” Craig said. Confused, Stan looked up. Craig’s eyes were on the dog. “You’re triggering Pandora.”

“I’m triggering your dog?” asked Stan. That didn’t make any sense whatsoever, but he stopped rubbing his arms nonetheless. “What does that even mean?”

“It means you’re triggering her,” Craig replied. “Pandora, off.”

Pandora hopped off of Stan’s legs and backed away. Her tail wagged. Stan brushed the fur that Pandora had left behind off of his legs, and stood up before she could try to hop up again. He didn’t really need to be seated on the couch anymore, anyway. They could make the rest of the transaction standing, probably.

Craig didn’t need to say anything when he began to make his way up the stairs. Stan just understood that he should follow. One thing that he did not understand, however, was why Craig was bringing his golden retriever with them. He feared that he might have misread it, but such a fear was short-lived. Craig pushed open the door to his bedroom and left it open for Stan.

Craig’s bedroom looked vaguely familiar, and Stan was pretty sure that was because he’d seen it before. It had been years — almost ten, to be exact —, but he had, in fact, been here in the past. There were the same posters of space and shit that he remembered being there, like

the planet poster above Craig's bed, and the solar system map over his desk. There was one that he hadn't seen before, though, and that was a picture of some sort of galaxy-looking thing. Pink at the top, blue on the bottom, and a small area of purple intermixed in the center. It was pretty neat, Stan would admit. That only spurred him on to ask about it.

"Hey, Craig," he said. Craig grunted. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

Stan pointed to the galaxy poster just to the right of the bedroom window. Craig followed with his eyes, and when he saw what was being referenced, he made a quiet noise of recognition.

"That's Abell two-seven-four-four," he answered, studying the fraying poster. "That's Pandora's Cluster."

Stan let out a soft hum of realization, his attention suddenly turning to the golden retriever standing next to Craig. "That's the thing you named your dog after?"

There was a pause. And then, Craig said, "yeah."

"What's up with you and space, anyway?" blurted Stan, the words coming out before he could realize the possible repercussions. Fortunately, Craig didn't seem bothered by his tone — even if it had come off significantly more snappish than Stan had intended. Craig just shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess you could say it's a special interest." With that, Craig sat down on the floor at the foot of his bed. He stretched his legs out in front of him. Pandora hovered next to him. Stan felt awkward, standing just in the entryway of his room. He didn't know what else to do, so he just watched. Craig gently stroked down Pandora's back, petting her calmly. He looked at Stan and said, "well?"

"Well what?" Stan asked.

"Go get your shit," Craig answered.

"I thought you were getting it," Stan replied.

"You came unannounced," responded Craig, "so you can get it yourself."

Stan was unsure of how that sat with him. He scratched the back of his neck, giving a wary glance around the room. He didn't see the bag anywhere, though, so he wasn't entirely sure what to do. He didn't exactly feel comfortable rooting through Craig's room until he got lucky. "Um," he muttered, taking a slow step in, "where is it?"

Craig sniffed that patented, Craig Tucker sniff, and rubbed his nose with his sleeve. Pandora licked his face, and he gently pushed her off. "In my closet, on the shelf at the top."

And thus began the digging. Stan made his way over to the closet and pulled open the door. His gaze scanned the top shelf quickly. It took him a moment to find the black bag in the dark

of the closet, but he eventually did with the help of the metallic sharpies that reflected the little light that entered the room from the window and the hallway.

Stan stretched his arms up, slowly and carefully maneuvering the bag so he could lower it down from the shelf. He grunted when it slipped over the edge and fell into his arms. Stan glanced around the room for the second time, trying to find a place where he could rummage through the bag with as much light and room as possible. He ended up setting the bag on an empty spot on Craig's desk. From there, he clicked open the buckles and opened the flap.

When he thought he heard Craig say something, he looked over his shoulder to listen. He opened his mouth to ask him to repeat whatever he'd said, but he didn't get that far. He closed his mouth when he saw what he was doing.

"Soothe," Craig said, patting his right thigh with a lightly-closed fist. Immediately, Pandora reacted. She crawled over his lap and rested her forelegs over Craig's thighs, much like she'd done with Stan just a few minutes earlier. In fact, it was exactly like she'd done with Stan. The only difference was that Craig was on the floor, not the couch. Stan saw Craig smile a little as he scratched Pandora behind the ears. Craig whispered, "good girl."

Stan turned his attention back to the bag and tried to ignore the fact that he felt like he'd witnessed something personal. He eventually found the book that he remembered seeing Craig put his LSD in, and pulled it out of the depths of the bag. Some of the other bags full of drugs and other such goodies crinkled as he did. Stan made sure that he didn't drop anything. He turned and looked at Craig. "What page?" he asked, holding the book up. Craig didn't look at him.

"Sixty-nine," he replied.

"Seriously?"

"What? It's the page I left off on."

Stan didn't reply to that. He simply opened the book and flipped to the mentioned page. Sure enough, just as promised, the two little white tabs of LSD stared back at him. They were harmless in their little bag, but at the same time, they looked fucking terrifying.

Stan had never heard stories of what LSD did. The only thing he knew was from the media he'd managed to stumble across in all of his years of life. Which, assuredly, was not very much at all. The extent of his knowledge was *it's a psychedelic, and it's gonna make me experience some shit*.

Nausea clawed up his throat. He swallowed it down. His fingers closed around the edge of the bag, and the material slipped on itself as he gripped it. He slid the bag into his palm. Slowly, so slowly, Stan put the book back into the bag. He pushed the LSD into his empty pocket, and pulled out the money from his other pocket. He sorted through the different bills and looked at Craig.

"A hundred, right?" he asked, his mouth dry. Craig only shook his head. Pandora was still in his lap, but he had since stopped scratching behind her ears. He simply rested a hand on her

back, stroking her blond coat. Stan furrowed his brows at the negative response from Craig. He was suddenly glad he'd overcompensated. "No? What do you mean? How much is it?"

"It's not worth more than thirty," Craig said. Stan nearly staggered.

"*What?*" Stan could have scrounged up thirty dollars on his own in a week. He had to make a deal with his father to get this money. The only thing that roamed through his head was *what the hell?*

"Yeah," replied Craig. Another sniff, but he was still as stoic as ever. "I lied."

Unable to respond in sentences longer than a word, Stan asked, "*Why?*"

Craig began to pet Pandora a little more insistently. He combed his fingers through her fur. "I wanted to see how far you'd go," he answered bluntly. "I didn't think you'd go for it, but you went farther than I thought, so... congratulations, I guess. You earned it."

When Stan didn't say anything, Craig looked up.

"What? Are you upset or something?" questioned Craig. He stopped petting Pandora. "Look, it says more about you than it does about me. If you're mad, go pout somewhere else. Leave the thirty bucks on my desk and go."

How cold, Stan thought. He didn't know why he expected anything other than what he got, though. And, was he really that upset about the fact that Craig lied? Sure, it was annoying, but he wouldn't say he was pissed off, or anything. Stan huffed, carding his fingers through his hair. He dropped thirty bucks on Craig's desk. The remembrance of his deal kept him steady in his spot. "Do you have any wine?" asked Stan. Craig snapped to attention, giving Stan a hard stare.

"Excuse me?"

"Wine," Stan repeated. "Or any alcohol, honestly. Do you have any, and if you do, can I buy it with the extra?"

Stan waved the two fifties in the air for emphasis on just how much he had left over, but Craig didn't seem to take too kindly to what he was asking. His brows twitched downward, and his nostrils flared. "You didn't say *anything* about mixing LSD with *alcohol*, you *fucking moron*," Craig growled. Stan's eyes widened at just how much inflection was being used. The last time he heard his tone like that, Craig had been pinning him in a snowbank. "What did I say about research?"

"Okay, fine, I didn't do the research," Stan admitted, "but the alcohol isn't for me, it's for my — y'know, the person I got the money from. They wanted me to get them something with what I had left, and... they wanted wine."

"You made a deal with someone else so you could get the money for the LSD?" Craig asked. The undertones of incredulity slipped out from the cracks of his words. He stopped petting Pandora, his nose twitching like he was on the verge of scowling. Stan opened his mouth to

respond, but no sound came out. Craig ducked his head down, fully immersing himself in the resumed petting of his dog. Stan felt like nothing more than an intruder. He assured himself it wasn't too creepy to watch some guy he hardly knew pet his dog like she was a lifeline, but that didn't stop the uncertainty. A few minutes passed. Craig looked up. He looked and sounded much calmer as he said, "c'mere, Marsh, lets talk."

That made Stan feel wary, to say the least. He wasn't exactly thrilled on getting antagonized about this shit again; he'd had enough of that with Tweek involved just the other day. It was weird enough that they seemed to so accurately be on the same page. Another strange thing that Stan had noticed about the relationship of Tweek and Craig, would be that Craig actually seemed to be the good cop.

Slowly, Stan advanced, shoving both of his hands in his pockets. He sat a few feet away from Craig on the floor, slouching to protect himself subconsciously for what was coming next. Craig didn't say anything. Like, at all.

Needing to lighten the mood, Stan asked, "so, where's your shadow?"

That was the wrong thing to say.

Craig's movements and posture remained languid and chill, and the pets he was giving Pandora had calmed down significantly, but the look he gave Stan when their eyes caught was eerie. The only thing expressing anything was the cold blue of his eyes — which only seemed to stand out among everything else.

"I'm not the sun, Tweek doesn't revolve around me," Craig said. "He's not *my* anything. He's his own person, and it pisses me off that people seem to forget that so easily. Did you know he was the lead in the fall musical?"

Stan blinked. "He can sing?"

Craig's eyes narrowed. "That's the thing you grab onto?"

"Well, the last time I heard him sing was in elementary school," defended Stan, fidgeting with the contents of his pockets. "And I wouldn't even call that singing, I mean, all he did was scream. Like, I know *you* can sing — "

"Okay, okay, I get it," Craig said, looking away again. Just as he did, Pandora leaned up and licked his face. He squinted against the licking, trying to withdraw from the slobber.

"Pandora, no, stop." He pushed her face away from his face, and she finally calmed, settling for resting her forelegs in his lap again. The conversation rerouted, now back on track. "My point is, Tweek does a lot of things on his own, and he doesn't even get recognized for it. He was on the speech team last year, did you know that?"

Now that he thought about it, Stan *did* know that. He'd seen him around during the speech tournament he'd come to so he could support Kyle. He didn't really realize it was Tweek until later, but even so, he hadn't thought much of it. "Oh, yeah, I knew that," Stan said, trying to recall the memory. "He was talking pretty avidly to a wall."

“Probably because he was in prose,” Craig replied. “He started off in extemp, actually, but it really wasn’t working for him, so they switched him to prose mid-season, which they don’t usually do. And you know what?”

Stan was tempted to respond with *what?* but he knew it would be useless. Craig would say it anyway.

“He got a picket fence score and moved onto finals.”

Stan’s eyes widened at that. A picket fence score? He knew what that was, from his limited experience with the activity. Kyle had explained it in detail when he got one himself, practically gushing about how he *got all ones, I finally got all ones, Stan do you know what this means? I got first place in all of my prelims!* And Stan had been so excited for him. Kyle had worked his ass off to get there. For Tweek to do it his first try was pretty amazing.

“He was sooo happy.” Craig was practically glowing as he relayed Tweek’s achievement to Stan, a small smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. He smoothed his palm down Pandora’s back. Pandora’s tail wagged. Suddenly, Craig’s expression fell. “On the bus back they read your scores to the team so everyone can celebrate, but for him, they didn’t do that. It was like they forgot he existed.”

“Jeez,” said Stan. “Did he ever bring it up with the coaches?”

“No, he didn’t bring it up with anyone.”

Stan furrowed his brows. “Well, maybe he should have.”

Craig gave him a sideways look. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, Marsh.”

“What do you mean?” Stan asked. “If something fucked up, he should have told someone.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Yeah it is, it’s literally just walking up to the coach and bringing it up.”

Craig’s look morphed into a glare. “You’ve obviously never had to deal with anxiety a day in your life.”

That shut Stan up quickly. He couldn’t deny it. Although still a little defiant in his stance, he decided to just drop it. It wasn’t a battle worth fighting.

Suddenly, Pandora leaped up again. She moved to stand her forelegs on Craig’s thighs rather than lay, and she’d begun to lap at his face like she’d done just a few minutes earlier. “Dude, seriously?” Craig said, lifting his head away from her tongue. He didn’t get very far, though, with her on his lap and all. She finally stopped licking his face, instead deciding to start licking his hand. He lowered that hand to his thigh and repeated the command from earlier. He patted his leg. “Soothe.”

Pandora dropped back down to Craig’s lap.

Stan quirked a brow.

“I’ve never seen anyone use that command with a dog,” Stan said, attempting to prompt an explanation. Craig didn’t indulge him.

“So tell me about your drug experience,” stated Craig.

“My — ” Stan stumbled over the word. “My drug experience?”

“That’s what I said,” Craig replied. He looked at Stan. “Well? What are you waiting for? Spill.”

“Oh, um... mostly weed, but I took cough syrup once.”

“I don’t care about the cough syrup,” Craig told him. “How long have you been smoking weed?”

Stan blinked. He turned his gaze down, trying to recall the first time he’d ever gotten high on weed. “I... think I started when I was thirteen, so... what, four years? Give or take a few months?”

That didn’t seem to impress Craig. Then again, Stan wasn’t trying to impress a drug dealer. He didn’t want to be *that guy*. “Weed might never be the same for you after you do LSD.” After Craig said that, Stan began to feel a little nervous.

“What do you mean?” asked Stan, hesitant.

“Acid can really mess with your perceptions of things,” Craig began. Immediately, Stan knew he was in for a mini lecture. “Even if it’s subconscious, there’s usually some sort of shift, and that shift can seriously mess people up. The best way I can explain it is it’s like folding a paper. Acid folds a paper in your brain. Then you come down, and you unfold the paper, but it’s not the same. It’s not really hurting anything, you can still write on it and use it, but it’ll never be fully flat again, even if you stick it under a weight for a while.”

“Wait, what?” Stan sputtered. “It’s going to fuck up my brain?”

“No. Just like how folding a paper doesn’t fuck up the paper, the acid isn’t going to fuck up your brain. It’s just going to affect your perception of what’s on the paper — or, in your brain.” Craig slowly pulled his arms to his chest, crossing them. “Since weed goes along the same sort of pathways, it interacts with the paper like it usually does. It just looks and feels different, because it has to deal with the crease you put in it.”

Craig looked over at him.

“Does that make sense?” he asked.

Stan nodded.

“Good.” After that, Craig nudged Pandora and said, “off.”

Pandora scooted off of his lap and wandered just a foot or so to the side. She refused to stray too far from her owner, however, and as soon as Craig stood up, she stuck to his leg like glue. Stan wasn't sure what was going on, nor was he sure about what he was supposed to do, but he decided to follow Craig's lead. He shoved himself off of the floor, finding himself upright. Even though Craig had a few extra inches on him, Stan found it easy to talk to him on the same level. The more he got to know Craig, the more he realized he wasn't nearly as big bad and mysterious as he'd thought.

And then Craig held out his hand expectantly and said, "unlock your phone and give it to me."

Stan would admit, he lost a little bit of trust in the guy. He made a skeptical face. "Why?"

"I'm going to put my number in it, smart one," Craig retorted. "So you can contact me if you need anything."

"What would I need you for?"

... maybe that was a little harsh.

Craig didn't seem to care. Or maybe he simply hadn't noticed the accidental sharpness.

"If you have any questions, I don't trust you to find good resources," he said. Stan wanted to defend himself, but he knew Craig had a point. "Besides, I'm a good trip sitter."

"A good what now?"

"For fuck's sake, are you actually this clueless?" Craig asked. "A trip sitter is like a babysitter, but instead of keeping an eye on children, they keep an eye on people who are tripping. Now hand over your phone before I take it."

"I didn't bring it," Stan told him. Craig's expression fell, like he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"What do you mean, you didn't bring it?"

"I didn't bring it," Stan repeated. "I didn't think I'd need it."

Craig hissed a breath in through his teeth and shut his eyes. Exasperation radiated from his very being. "You walked," he began, rubbing his hand over his forehead, "half a mile, in winter, with asthma, without your phone."

Stan, unsure of how he was supposed to proceed, simply stated, "yes."

"You're dumb and I hate you," Craig said to him in a blunt monotone, tugging his own phone out of his pants pocket. He unlocked it and handed it to Stan. "Put your number in. I'll text you later, and you better answer."

Slowly, Stan took the phone from Craig's hand. He navigated to the contacts and entered his information quickly, quietly, and without any further argument. He was already on the verge

of nervous laughter from just how candid this guy always was. There was no beating around the bush with him. Hell, there was no *bush*. It was probably just a stick stuck in the ground. He saved the contact and handed Craig's phone back. Craig looked at the contact.

"You capitalized your name," Craig noted. Stan's brows twitched downward.

"What?"

"Your name," Craig repeated, looking back up at Stan. "It's in capital letters."

Stan felt distinctly weirded out by where this conversation could be going. Confused, he replied, "um... yeah?"

Craig's attention went back to the phone screen. Stan watched as Craig tapped something with his thumb. As he did whatever he was doing, he said, "capital letters are reserved for people I'm close to."

"How was I supposed to know that?" Stan asked.

"By looking at my other contacts."

"Dude! Invasion of privacy isn't my forte."

"It's not invading privacy. I gave you my phone, it's pretty much common courtesy to be observant."

Stan looked at Craig like he'd lost it. "I'm really starting to feel glad that I didn't bring my phone," he told him, unapologetic in his overall slightly disturbed tone. When Craig only smirked, Stan decided to try and speed up the rest of the visit. "So... could I buy some wine, then?"

Craig snorted, amused. "As much as I *totally* trust you not to tamper with that deal you made, you're not getting any alcohol from me, Marsh."

"Aw — dammit," Stan cussed.

Chapter End Notes

fun fact:

this is the longest chapter in the entire story thus far at 6k+ words!

next update will be on wednesday, december 12th!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Goodness in Grief

Chapter Summary

Stan opened the bag.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Randy gave him a very skeptical look when Stan dropped the change from his visit with Craig on the coffee table in front of him. Stan caught the expression easily, but he didn't honestly believe there was much threat behind it. He was more interested in the reason behind his father suddenly donning a very formal tuxedo. Since Randy wasn't saying anything about the wine he was supposed to have brought home, Stan decided to try and bring up the topic in a way that would be as least incriminating as possible. First, of course, he had to figure out if it was even safe to do so.

"Is Mom home?" Stan asked.

"She's upstairs getting ready," Randy answered. Stan furrowed his brows, unsure of what that was supposed to mean.

"Ready for what?"

"Your mother and I are going to a musical in Denver." Something upstairs creaked, and Stan had a feeling that was his mother moving something around in the master bedroom.

"It's a little late to be going to Denver, don't you think?" Stan responded. "That's, like, a two hour drive one way."

"I know that, Stan, that's why we're spending the weekend up there."

Stan was startled at the sudden introduction of that prospect. His parents were going away to Denver for the weekend? Was that them trying to mend everything between them? He wondered if that was really a good idea, but after a while of mulling it over, he realized they must have been doing pretty well if Sharon was willing to spend forty-eight hours up north with Randy. He'd admit, it kind of stung, because it just reinforced the fact that Stan had been the one and only reason his parents had broken up.

Again.

Sharon came down the stairs a few minutes later, carrying a small bag in her hand as she descended. The purple dress she wore was familiar to Stan; he'd seen it once or twice before. When she saw him, she immediately walked over and wrapped him up in a hug. He fought

the urge to recoil from the physical contact, and instead politely returned it. She pulled away a few seconds later and looked him in the eyes. She held his shoulders gingerly. “How was it with your friend?” she asked him, and he glanced over to Randy. Randy was waving pretty frantically, urging him to go with it.

“It was fine,” Stan replied. “We, uh... hung out with his dog.”

Sharon furrowed her brows, and out of the corner of his gaze, he saw his father face-palm. Stan immediately began to panic. Shit, wait, who did she think he was hanging out with? “Kyle has a dog?” she asked. The panic rose up. *Shit shit shit.*

“Oh, crap, did I say dog? I meant brother.”

Did I really just fucking say that? He thought. He could feel his face heating up, and he hoped to all that was holy that he wasn’t blushing noticeably. *Fucking kill me. Kill me right now.*

“Don’t call Ike a dog, Stan, that’s not very nice,” she scolded him.

“Sorry, it won’t happen again,” Stan apologized. Although his navigation through that awkward interaction was merely an inch from being abysmal, his mother appeared satisfied. She brushed his hair back with her hand, and smiled at him. He returned the smile.

“Your father and I are going to Denver for the weekend,” she said lightly, as if she was being careful with her words. He wasn’t sure what she was trying to get at, if anything, but the way she spoke sounded strange to him. He wondered if it had something to do with his mental breakdown the other day. Sure enough, she soon continued with, “will you be alright on your own?”

Stan sighed. All of the concern he’d been getting from other people was beginning to exhaust him. “I’ll be fine, Mom,” he assured her. She gave him a look, and he responded to that look with his own, firmer expression.

“If you’re sure,” she said. She brought him into another hug, but this one was significantly shorter, and Stan was obviously not expected to return it. “Jimbo is going to be checking in on you this weekend — ”

“Sharon, we’re gonna be late,” said Randy. At some point, he’d moved from the couch to the door. He carried a suitcase in his hand, and his keys in the other. He sounded impatient, and Stan knew he probably was. Sharon, on the other hand, payed him no mind, and simply continued with her instruction.

“ — so make sure you keep an ear out for the phone and the door, and let him know if you go anywhere — ”

“Mom,” Stan said, urging her to wrap it up. “I got it, seriously, I’ll be fine, just go before you’re late.”

Sharon was obvious in her reluctance to leave. Stan felt admittedly a little bad about being so pushy, and for worrying her so much, but he really didn't want to ruin it for them. He refused to be the cause of any more issues from that point forward. She continued her doting even as she made her way out the door with Randy. "There's leftover lasagna in the fridge, you can reheat it for dinner tonight, and I left some money on the counter in case you wanted to order food for tomorrow — oh, honey, could you lock the door behind us, please? I love you, Stan."

"I love you, too," Stan replied. She waved to him as she stepped fully out into the cold. He locked the door when she finally closed it. Almost subconsciously, he wandered over to the window. He leaned his forehead against it, watching in subdued excitement as his parents packed everything into the car and left. He followed the car down the street with his eyes, and continued to stare out at the road even after they'd disappeared.

The sun was gone. It was only about five thirty or six, but since it was winter, the night set in anyway. It blanketed the entire neighborhood, and the streetlights had flicked on to keep the black of evening at bay. It glittered in the snow. There was a remaining scent of pasta and cooked beef that lingered in the air. Stan hadn't noticed it before, but now he did, and he knew it must have been the lasagna his mother made. He was confused at when she'd made it, since it took a long time to cook and he hadn't been gone for *that* long, had he? He didn't remember when he'd ended up leaving, so he couldn't say for sure.

Trailing a hand through his hair, Stan sighed. Now that he'd finished the day, he realized he could hardly keep his eyes open in the dim lighting of the house. There was a loopy feeling in his brain that fogged some of his better judgment. That being said, he refused to let himself sleep. There was something in him that urged him to try and stay up until at least eight, so he didn't end up fucking his schedule up too badly. He just needed to keep himself occupied for another two hours.

He folded the bag of LSD between his fingers, and slowly pulled it out of his pocket. Stan was very upfront in saying he knew nothing about LSD. He didn't know very much about drugs other than the cliches he'd seen on the media. But, somewhere in the fogged-up logic side of his brain, he assured himself that experiencing something as intense as LSD would keep him awake... right? And it lasted a few hours. Afterward, he could crawl into bed and pass the fuck out.

Stan grabbed his phone out of his backpack on the way to his room, and clicked it on when he was halfway up the stairs. He'd gotten one, single message, and that message was from an unknown number. He tapped in his pass code and flopped himself down on his bed, staring at the brightly lit background of his phone. He read the message.

Unknown Number +1 (719...

Today 18:04

hey. its me. i am not saying my name bc u no who i am and i am not incriminating myself like that just in case u gave me a wrong number, dumb butt

Craig. Stan rolled his eyes. He was about to shut his phone off, but then he noticed the bubble icon pop up, signifying Craig was typing. Within a matter of seconds, the text came through.

Unknown Number +1 (719...

do not ignore me, u dik

*dick

Stan decided to respond, if only to get Craig to leave him alone.

Unknown Number +1 (719...

thanks for correcting yourself, that was 100% necessary, especially for the word “dick”.

Stan rolled onto his side, pressing his cheek into his pillow and almost passing out right then and there from the sheer comfort of it. He pinched himself awake and forced his eyes open. He set the bag of LSD down on his bed directly in front of him, and proceeded to stare at it. He was seriously contemplating taking it. Right then. The temptation was strong. His phone buzzed.

Unknown Number +1 (719...

Today 18:10

yea w/e, u sarcastic shit.

do you end all of your texts with an insult?

only 4 ppl i do not like

There was no insult on the end of that one. Stan was almost impressed. But then the bubble popped up, and a split second later, he was staring at two more words.

Unknown Number +1 (719...

, u fuck

Stan added Craig as a contact under a very creative, descriptive name, and shut off his phone. He set it face down on his nightstand and turned his body back to the bag of LSD he still couldn't believe he actually had. The notion of it was insane. Simply knowing it was in his possession was enough to get him to feel antsy about his motivations. He knew he didn't want to hurt himself. He didn't want to fuck anything up on accident. That'd hurt his mother, and it'd hurt Kyle, and it wouldn't look great for Craig. He solidified his resolution to himself by saying it out loud.

“I will not cause any more problems,” he stated as he picked up the bag of LSD. Slowly, Stan sat himself up. His bed creaked as he moved, and his jeans made a disconcerting noise when they rubbed against the fabric of his sheets. If he just took a little bit... if he just took a *little bit*, there would be no harm. Craig had said so himself: even with a lot, he’d probably be fine. No one had died from an LSD overdose, Craig had told him. Stan remembered those words very, very specifically. Stan gazed around the room, as if expecting someone to pop out at him, but he was alone. He was completely alone.

Stan opened the bag.

The white tabs stared at him and ushered him to go further. *Do it*, they egged him on. *Do it*.

Stan dumped one tab into his palm, and swallowed down his nervousness. *Just put it on your tongue. Just put it in your mouth. Come on. Come on. Do it.*

Do it.

Stan lifted the tab.

BAM BAM BAM

Stan gasped and almost dropped the LSD. He pushed the tab back into the bag and zipped it up. Fuck. Fuck, who was that? Who was there? Whoever it was, they were desperate to get inside — either that, or they just had a very strong knock. Considering there had only been three, Stan found that more plausible. It was more than likely Uncle Jimbo. Christ, already? It hadn’t even been twenty minutes.

Frantic, Stan rummaged around his room until he found a place where he could store it. The dresser wouldn’t work, he would forget it was there. His bedside table was out of the question; it was already full of various items that he just couldn’t seem to get rid of. That only left one place. He wasted no time in swinging open the closet door and grabbing the Toolshed outfit. The alcohol was still in there, and the flask clinked against the belt as he shoved the LSD inside of the shirt. *Just don’t take it with the alcohol*, he reminded himself as he wrapped it up once more. He shoved it into the dark corner of his closet.

BAM BAM BAM

Stan pushed his closet doors closed and left his bedroom, thumping his way loudly down the stairs. The repetition of the disruptive noise disagreed with his brain’s sense of order, even if it was the same sound each time. He shook his head as he approached it, not feeling too inclined to check exactly who was outside before he opened the door. He already knew it was his uncle.

He swung the door open, his mouth open to talk up a lie about how he was trying to sleep, but he stopped short when he saw he’d been wrong about who was knocking.

It wasn’t Jimbo at all. It was Kyle.

And Kyle was shaking, breathing like he'd forgotten how. His eyes were rimmed pink and puffy; his cheeks and nose were drenched in an emotional flush. His coat hung off of him like someone had tried to rip it off. Something inside of his eyes shifted and glinted. Before Stan could wrap his head around the troubling visual of his friend, Kyle practically fell into him. Stan let go of the door in favor of supporting Kyle. The way he shook was so reminiscent of the lunch room incident, and it frightened him. He wasn't prepared to deal with something like that again.

Kyle breathed a very quiet noise of what sounded like pain. Stan was afraid.

"Kyle?" he whispered, his body shocked from the cold his friend radiated. "Kyle, are you okay?"

"Shut the door," Kyle said, and his voice was ominously calm in his ear. It was such a stark contrast to what Stan had expected to hear, that it sent him reeling. Kyle looked like he'd been crying, but he wasn't crying currently. Surely that meant something, right? Maybe it wasn't that bad. Maybe, he hadn't been crying at all. Maybe it was just the cold. So many ideas whirled through Stan's brain. With his arms still wrapped around Kyle, Stan kicked the front door shut. As soon as it was closed, Kyle let go of him and stumbled backwards. He looked unsteady in the way he stood, and the way he looked, but his eyes remained strong.

Stan broke the silence. "Kyle, what — "

"Do you still know how to play guitar?" Kyle blurted, his gaze unwavering. His breaths still came out in hurried huffs, but his cheeks were slowly losing the intense flush. When Stan didn't reply immediately, Kyle repeated, "do you still know how to play guitar?"

"Yeah," Stan finally replied. Kyle visibly relaxed — and yet, seemed to tense up at the exact same time. Kyle sniffed.

"Would you play a song with me if I taught you how?"

Stan wasn't expecting that question. He'd become confused. Even so, he said, "sure."

Kyle was the one who lead the both of them upstairs. Stan followed, as if this wasn't his own house. In a way, it seemed that Kyle might have needed that. Stan knew him, and if something had happened, it was likely that Kyle was trying to control everything. In that way, he was a control freak. It was rare that such a trait made itself glaringly obvious — it was only in desperate times that it became noticeable.

They parted ways when they reached Stan's bedroom. Kyle spun around and grabbed Stan's wrist when Stan moved to keep walking down the hall. His green eyes were wide like he'd just heard Stan say something abhorrent. Stan, startled, said, "I'm going to grab my dad's guitar. It'll be easier with two."

Slowly, Kyle let go of Stan's wrist. His expression overall had calmed, though his eyes were still wide and bloodshot. Stan gave him a look that he hoped was reassuring, but he doubted it had much of an effect, even with the little smile. He entered his parent's bedroom and

rummaged through their closet, where he remembered his father having stored his guitar. Sure enough, there it was. The black case, dusty and rough under his fingers, felt like home.

Stan opened the case and withdrew the guitar inside, being careful with it. The instrument was old; older than he was, that was for certain, and he didn't want to break it while his parents were out in Denver. He carried it gingerly out of his parent's bedroom and into his own, where Kyle had since made himself comfortable on the floor near Stan's desk. His closet door was open from Kyle retrieving Stan's own guitar, which he'd buried in there almost a year ago. Stan ignored the parallels between his father and himself, and sat down in front of Kyle, sitting with his legs crossed and setting the guitar in his lap. His guitar was more crisp than his father's, but the rich umber of it suited Kyle's skin tone. Usually.

In that moment, the guitar just made Kyle look small.

Their positions were an exact mirror image of each other. Kyle, ambidextrous, had settled for using his left to strum rather than to press the chords. Stan realized soon that he'd done so on purpose — to make it easier for Stan to learn.

"Are you ready?" Kyle asked, his voice barely above a whisper. Stan nodded.

They went chord by chord. After Stan got the hang of the pattern, Kyle began to add instructions for what his plucking would look like. Stan had always been partial to using his fingers for strumming and such, so it was practically second nature for him to pick it up. Kyle, on the other hand, was used to a pick, and it showed in the way that he struggled to get the correct sound on the first try. As they moved through the song, though, Kyle warmed up to it.

Stan didn't know how many times they went through the song. It could have been five, it could have been ten, it could have been fifty — whatever the number, the effect was the same. Stan managed to pick it up after a few runs through, and the knowledge that he'd learned it shook his fingers.

"Slow down," Kyle whispered, a faint smile on his face. His eyes watered as he spoke, but he had not yet started to cry. Stan smiled back, though it pained him, and slowed his strumming and chord shifts.

But, as Stan grew more proficient in the song, Kyle fell off into a tapering descent. His strumming was no longer as natural and rhythmic as before, and the picking of his fingers slowed to a gradual cease. Eventually, the only thing that remained of Kyle's playing was the echo of a distant A minor. Kyle slowly lowered his head, and Stan didn't know what was going on with him until he saw drops falling past the guitar in his friend's lap. Concern wilted his lungs, and Stan stopped playing suddenly. "Kyle — "

"Keep playing," Kyle choked, his voice a soft croak of emotion. Stan didn't need to be told twice.

He didn't remember where he'd left off, so he started the song over, picking his way through chords of A minor E. Kyle carefully set his own instrument down on the floor when Stan strummed the first D minor. By the time he reached the second run of C and G7, Kyle had

wrapped himself up in his own arms and sunk into an uncharacteristic slouch. Stan reached the end of the song before Kyle was ready, and as soon as he played the final note, Kyle drew in a sharp breath.

“Play it again,” he urged — his voice had lost all power, but Stan obeyed nonetheless.

As soon as Stan played the first A minor, though, it was different. Kyle began to mumble to himself, something almost inaudible and borderline musical — until, with a start, Stan realized it was musical. Kyle wasn’t mumbling, he was singing, and he was doing so in a language Stan did not understand. The lyrics sounded almost Russian at first, which confused him, and he tried not to pay it mind. He simply kept playing; he couldn’t make out any strings of words to separate logically in his brain, anyway.

Eventually, he heard Kyle hum out something that sounded like, “*lernt alef beis*.” It was the only thing he could make out among the foreign language, and his mind latched onto it like it would help him understand. He tended not to think much while he played guitar, but that was usually because there wasn’t much to think about at the time. It was a mindless hobby he’d picked up because he’d been bored. Kyle was giving it meaning.

The longer Stan played, the longer Kyle mumbled. The longer Kyle mumbled, the more connections began to surface in Stan’s brain. The Russian-sounding song began to register almost Germanic, which stuck out to the part of him that remembered he had been taking the German course in school. He struggled to try and understand the words, but Kyle’s hushed utterings weren’t understandable to him.

“*Komets alef oh*,” Kyle heaved into the air. Those were the last words Stan caught, and those were the last lyrics Kyle sang. When Kyle drew in a breath, it was audible as a soft, sputtering gasp. It sounded like it scratched his throat and vocal cords, which made him whimper a little squeak of a noise. Kyle clutched at his own jacket. He’d started to rock gently back and forth, trying to soothe himself even as his crying became more distinct. Those whimpering gasps progressed until they happened every time Kyle breathed in. Every time he exhaled, he sobbed. Tears were flowing freely from his eyes, dripping down his cheeks and falling from his chin to his lap and the carpet.

Stan did not stop playing, even when the sounds filled the room past bursting. He’d never — *never* — seen Kyle cry like this.

A particularly forceful cry made Stan flinch, but he continued steadily through the D minor he’d been working on.

Stan’s fingers hurt. It had been so long since he’d last played. The calluses that he’d built up had faded, and he’d need to play more often to regain the strength. Although it stung, he refused to stop. Kyle needed this. It was unpleasant to listen to Kyle cry, but Kyle *needed this*, and Stan would never take it away from him.

At the end of the fifth play, though, he had to. Kyle did not complain. Kyle, too, had ceased; his rocking had calmed, and the tears no longer fell from his eyes. His cheeks were slowly fading back to their usual color. His grip was loosening on his own arms. Kyle sniffed, looked up, clenched his jaw — and whispered, so very quietly, “thank you.”

Stan did not ruin the moment with his own voice. Not yet. He adjusted his grip on his father's guitar until he could slide it carefully and set it down on the floor next to the instrument already there. Ocher and umber, blocks of color; nostalgia.

"Kyle," Stan whispered back to him, looking at Kyle with soft eyes. "I'm here for you."

Tears filled Kyle's eyes again. They spilled over his cheeks. Shame shook his shoulders, and he lowered his head. No sobs left his lungs, even as he shared with Stan, "my mom is in the hospital."

Stan knew he wasn't done, so he said nothing.

"She's in the hospital," Kyle repeated, the words suddenly loud and dry. He inhaled. "She's in a medically-induced coma."

Kyle's breathing picked up. He opened his mouth to say something more, but a sob escaped instead. He slapped a hand over his mouth to keep himself quiet. It didn't stop his crying.

"They're say — " Kyle coughed, muffled against his hand. His next intake of breath sounded almost like a wheeze. Stan scooted closer, until their knees were almost touching. Another whimpering gasp escaped him as he finally said, "they're saying she might not *make it* — !"

Kyle cried out those two final words, cutting himself off with his tears in a sharp whine.

Stan swallowed.

"What — happened?" Stan asked, as soft as he could possibly be. "Did something happen on her business trip — ?"

"She was never on a business trip!" Kyle shouted. He ripped his ushanka off and threw it across the room with a sudden outburst. Afterward, he sank back down. Stan reached out. His fingers brushed Kyle's left arm, trying to comfort — but his movements held the opposite effect. Kyle flung his arm out, shoving Stan's hand away from him. "*Don't touch me!*"

Before Stan could decide whether to listen to him or not, Kyle's portrayal changed. His expression tensed, like he suddenly realized where he was and what he was doing, and he almost broke down again right there. He reached, hands groping for Stan to *come back*. Stan had no issues doing so. He scooted as close as possible, and then Kyle leaned forward, his arms wrapping around Stan's neck as he cried into Stan's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," Kyle whispered. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry," replied Stan hurriedly. He wrapped his arms around Kyle. Not a moment later, he slowly pulled Kyle into his lap so they could sit together better. He straightened his legs out. Kyle straddled his thighs. They just held each other, for a long time, in the soft light of Stan's bedroom. Kyle cried, and Stan mumbled, "you have nothing to be sorry for, it's okay, it's okay..."

"I lied to you," Kyle said shakily. "I said she was on a business trip, I..."

“It’s okay, I understand.” Stan stroked his fingers through Kyle’s curls. They looped through his fingers, having grown a little longer since December. He must not have cut his hair for a while. Kyle’s shaking slowly faded to only the intermittent, gentle racking of sobs and sniffs. “That’s why you were sending Ike to school, then?”

Kyle nodded against his shoulder. “Dad had to work, and Ma...” he trailed off, not giving his voice time to give out. He took a moment to breathe. “I was the only one left, I — I’m the only...”

Stan let the words hang in the air. Kyle was keen on continuing something else.

“And I thought — ” Kyle gasped for breath, his lungs seemingly tired from crying. “I thought, if I... if I just tried to — to be better, I could — ”

Kyle hiccuped.

“So I started memorizing *Mizmor LeDavid*,” Kyle said, his voice falling back into a whisper. “Psalm twenty-three — but I kept forgetting parts of it, and — I needed to write it down to remember, but after I memorized it, I couldn’t stop writing it.”

Stan remembered the red notebook of Kyle’s, which he’d seen him write Hebrew inside of. He remembered seeing it earlier in the week in class, and he remembered seeing it on Wednesday during the lunch room incident. That’s what Eric had been reading out of. On a whim, Stan asked, “is that what Cartman read out during lunch the other day? Psalm twenty-three?”

Kyle nodded, almost vigorously. “*Mizmor LeDavid, HaShem ro’i lo achsar*,” recited Kyle, his voice incredibly muffled by Stan’s shirt and shoulder. Stan could imagine the Hebrew alphabet as Kyle said the words, though he wasn’t sure how any of it was spelled. Kyle pulled his face away from Stan’s shoulder, and with a clear voice, whispered, “*the Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not lack.*”

Stan knew that one. It was read at virtually every funeral he’d ever attended. He had honestly never thought too much of it, though he had a feeling he could understand where Kyle was coming from.

“It was the only thing that held me together,” admitted Kyle. “It was the only — it was the only thing I could rely on to always — to always be there, and then Eric ripped it out of my hands and he — he fucking — he fucking *destroyed it*...”

Kyle withdrew from the death grip-like hug, just enough to look Stan in the eyes. His cheeks were stained from the damp of the tears he’d been shedding, and Stan forced himself not to wipe the tracks away. A look in Kyle’s eyes glittered, like there was so much more that he wasn’t saying. Concern ate away at Stan’s reservations until they were nonexistent. “There’s more to this, isn’t there?” he asked.

“I...” appearing shocked, Kyle’s gaze dropped to the space between them. Assuredly, there wasn’t much, but it was enough. Stan watched as his friend thought over it. His eyes twitched, scanning over something on Stan’s shirt. When Stan looked down, he realized it

must have been the faded PS2 logo the front brandished. Not a moment later, Kyle began to trace his fingers over it. “No...”

Kyle gripped the decal in his hand, tugging the shirt taught around Stan’s torso.

“No, there’s nothing, it’s just...” Kyle swallowed. “I need to be close to someone right now.”

Stan removed one of his arms from around his friend, and settled his hand over the top of Kyle’s. His skin was still pale from the cold. “I’m here for you,” Stan said to Kyle. His other hand cradled the back of Kyle’s head, playing with the curls for a moment. When that moment was over, he gently — so, so very gently — brought Kyle’s face close enough to press a loving kiss to his cheek. Stan pulled away. Their eyes met.

Something in the air sparked. That something was familiar, and pulled them like a magnet. Golden flecks among the green of Kyle’s eyes stood out almost impossibly. For a moment, everything else was forgotten. It was just them, sitting underneath the dim glow of a lamp. The world outside did not spin. Nothing else existed.

Kyle leaned in, and Stan subconsciously matched. They met halfway, their eyes closed and lips pressed together in a slow kiss.

Stan meant it to be chaste, but it quickly drifted into something more meaningful than that. Passion sprouted between them, finding cracks even when their chests were pressed together so tightly. Kyle’s hands had shifted to Stan’s shoulders, gripping them through the thin fabric of Stan’s shirt. Both of Stan’s own hands had collected purchase against Kyle’s lower back. Their fingers dug into the skin of each other’s bodies, overwhelmed by the adventure of exploring.

For a moment, they could forget.

Until Stan’s ankle unintentionally hit the side of one of the guitars, and he was snapped back into reality. Against his body’s wishes, Stan forced himself to withdraw from the passionate kisses. Kyle made a displeased whimper of a noise as Stan did. Stan gingerly pushed Kyle off of him. In a matter of seconds, Stan’s withdrawal from Kyle had resulted in the two of them separating completely. Stan stood. It might have been a little far to take their separation, but Stan couldn’t help it. If he was going to have a level head, he’d need to cool off — and that meant no touching.

“We shouldn’t be doing that,” Stan breathed, his eyes meeting Kyle’s own. They were half-lidded, and echoed a disappointment that Stan wasn’t used to. Stan averted his gaze, unwilling to see how his words might affect Kyle. Kyle stood, too.

“What do you mean?” Kyle asked. “Do you not want to — ?”

“That’s not it,” Stan replied. “Of course I want to, I just... you’re in a really sensitive state right now, and I don’t want to end up hurting you by taking advantage of that.”

“You won’t hurt me,” Kyle said. “You’re not taking advantage of me.”

Kyle began to trail closer to where Stan stood. Stan kept his ground, not wanting to hurt his friend's feelings by backing away. Kyle stopped when only six inches of space remained between them. It was hard to see, but Stan was able to make out the redness Kyle's lips had gained from their kissing. Stan couldn't withdraw his eyes from Kyle's mouth, even when it made him feel dirty.

"Is it so hard to believe I'm feeling better?" asked Kyle. "Because I am, it — it feels like a weight has been lifted off of my shoulders."

The words were accentuated by action; Kyle stood up a little straighter. His posture, however, was relaxed.

"It's so hard to keep a secret like that," he said, "and now I don't have to keep it a secret anymore. I'm relieved, Stan, and I'm in a really good head space for the first time in a really long time, and..."

Kyle trailed off. He lifted a hand like he was about to touch Stan, but stopped himself short.

"I understand, if you don't want to," Kyle broke. Stan saw him begin to bite at his lower lip. "And we don't have to do anything you aren't comfortable with, but... just know that I want to. I really want to."

Kyle's previous movement resumed, and suddenly, his fingertips were smoothing over Stan's chest, right where his heart was. The touch, while mundane in essence, served to electrify every nerve in his body. There was a voice in the back of his head that told him he shouldn't want to do something like this. He shouldn't want Kyle like this. That conflict overwhelmed Stan, even as Kyle pressed forward and brushed the fingers of his free hand against Stan's cheek.

They were so close that Stan couldn't avoid looking at Kyle's eyes.

He almost broke down when he saw his friend — his real friend, the *real* Kyle, inside of those irises.

"I trust you," Kyle said, and immediately, Stan could understand that it was true.

They kissed. Then, they kissed again — and again, until there were no discernible breaks between their presses. With closed eyes, they stumbled across the room. Kyle trusted Stan to lead them to the bed. It was faulty logic — Stan was overwhelmed with the responsibility of keeping them from tripping over the guitars, but even his conscious effort wasn't enough to keep from messing that up. A hollow *thunk* shifted the air around them as Kyle's heel hit one of the guitars on the ground. They both halted — but not for long.

Stan's hands slid down Kyle's back until he felt the rise of his ass. Kyle gasped, subconsciously arching into the grasp. Their mouths parted. Not a second later, Stan's grip tightened on Kyle. He gathered his strength and lifted Kyle up in his arms. There was a certain weightlessness to Kyle, in that moment, as Stan maneuvered them around the guitars and to the bed.

The mattress dipped beneath their weight, bouncing as they practically collapsed onto it. The back of Kyle's head hit the pillow, but the only thing to stop Stan's fall was Kyle himself. They grunted; Kyle lifted his hips just enough to let Stan's arms slip out from beneath him. From there, Stan adjusted, his forearms resting on the pillow, at either side of Kyle's head.

They looked at each other. Kyle's grip tightened on Stan's shoulders. Stan took the hint and leaned down, capturing Kyle's mouth with his own once again. Kyle licked out over Stan's bottom lip, teasing in a way that was utterly familiar. Stan parted his lips without thinking about it, and immediately his mouth was full of Kyle's tongue. At first, Stan just let it happen, fully willing to submit to the assertiveness — but then Kyle tugged Stan's lip between his teeth.

And nipped.

The sting radiated sharply, and he practically hissed as he lunged forward to close the distance.

Heat gathered between them as their shirts clung, breathing in heavy breaths at the same rate. A fire burned in the lowest point of Stan's abdomen. It was something he hadn't felt before — a new subset of affection, which was purely different from the arousal that he was used to.

The depth of it frightened him, but Kyle helped him feel more at ease. He helped him feel like he was in control of it.

Stan didn't know when it had started, but eventually they'd gained enough courage to start rocking their hips together. They settled at a pace that was comfortable for both of them, though it took a moment to find it. Kyle's fingers found purchase in Stan's hair, gripping at the locks as he arched to meet every movement. Stan, finding himself with a free hand, traced his fingers down Kyle's sides. He groped his ass.

"Oh, *fuck*," Kyle cursed softly, removing his hands from Stan's hair in favor of wrapping his arms around his neck. He pulled Stan down as close as possible. The movements of his hips stuttered. "That feels really good."

Stan's heart squeezed at the verbal affirmation that he was doing something right. That was *way* more than Wendy had ever given him. Now with a path to lead down, he focused more of his energy on massaging the flesh beneath his hand. The shudders and gasps he received were addictive. His pants began to feel tight. With every buck of his hips, Stan could feel Kyle's own arousal through the layers of clothing.

Suddenly hit with the fact that there were too many layers, Stan removed his hand from Kyle's ass. Kyle responded to the loss with a whimper, which Stan kissed away. He lifted his hips from Kyle's, and immediately began to work at unbuttoning their jeans. Although a little dazed at first, Kyle got the message, and reached down to help with the unbuttoning. His fingers shook as he undid Stan's zipper. Stan noticed.

"Are you okay?" he asked. His movements halted. Kyle didn't like that, and displayed his distaste by rocking his hips up.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Kyle insisted, his breaths coming out in gentle pants. His cheeks had flushed red with blush, and his lips were slick with saliva from their making out. Stan gave him a look of suspicion, though it was unfounded. He couldn’t help but be concerned, though, after earlier. Kyle drew his lower lip between his teeth for a second (which, mixed with the memory of Kyle’s bite, might have been the hottest expression Stan had ever seen) and breathlessly admitted, “I’m just *really* excited.”

Kyle gripped him through his jeans, and Stan’s breath hitched. A sly grin spread over Kyle’s lips.

“And you are, too.”

Stan practically crashed their mouths together. The kiss was sloppy, but they liked it all the same. “That was weirdly sexy,” he muttered in Kyle’s ear. The response was a chuckle. As he tugged the jeans down Kyle’s legs, Stan nipped at his ear. Kyle bit back a moan, struggling to get Stan’s pants down. Stan ended up helping him out, pushing them to his knees. They could deal with fully removing the articles later. For now, they just wanted to go back to grinding.

With less layers of clothing, touching each other felt like heaven. Stan lead their movements with little thrusts down, and Kyle met each and every one of them hungrily. He struggled to find somewhere to hold onto Stan, his fingers scratching from his shoulders to his lower back, then back up again. Stan reached behind Kyle to resume the groping Kyle enjoyed so much. His fingers scraped against the jacket Kyle still wore.

“Do you want to take that off?” Stan asked. A particularly pleasant roll of their hips caused Kyle to toss his head back.

“*Mmn* — what?” he responded, half out of it. When Stan tugged at the jacket, Kyle snapped back into lucidity. “No — no, I want to keep that on.”

Although Stan didn’t understand it, he didn’t push it. He simply drew his hand away from the jacket and went back to his goal. He gripped the flesh of Kyle’s behind, and as soon as he did, there was an immediate reaction. The moans Kyle had been successfully biting back came tumbling out all at once, fumbling like jumbled statements through the air.

Stan thought he heard Kyle say something. The words were such a shock to his system, however, that he chalked it up to his imagination. He ignored it, and simply continued the touching.

He trailed kisses down Kyle’s jaw and the side of his neck, and paused to lave his tongue over Kyle’s pulse point. The gasp he received in response was dangerously hot. And then, he heard the words again.

“Pin me down.”

Every fiber of Stan’s being throbbed. “*What?*” he gasped into Kyle’s neck, pausing in the middle of pressing their hips together.

“I want you,” began Kyle through shattered breaths, “to pin me down.”

Another throb.

Holy *shit*.

“Are — ” Stan cut off, lifting himself just enough to look down at Kyle’s flushed face. “Are you sure?”

Eyes half-lidded, Kyle simply nodded. He pulled his hands away from Stan’s shoulders, and laid them at either side of his head, palms facing up.

For a long time, Stan was too shocked to move.

“Please,” Kyle’s voice held strength, though vulnerability could be seen in his eyes. “I want you to be in control.”

Stan could truthfully say he’d never been in this position before. Even with Wendy, he’d never been given ultimate control like that. He wasn’t used to it, and he hadn’t even realized it was something he might actually want. Hell, even when he was faced with the possibility, he couldn’t figure out if he was prepared to fill such a dominant role.

Kyle wanted it, though. He was willing to give up the one thing he wanted to keep, and that...

Kyle trusted him.

Stan trusted Kyle.

Slowly, he adjusted. He lifted himself to sit on his knees so he had a better purchase (and so he wouldn’t fall on top of Kyle). Stan grabbed Kyle’s right wrist first, pressing it down against the mattress. Then, he grabbed Kyle’s left, and repeated the process.

Something happened.

Kyle sucked air in through his teeth. His eyes shut tightly. He bit his lip. None of those things were sexy, because all of those were done in pain. Something was legitimately hurting Kyle. His grip loosened significantly as he struggled to figure out what was wrong. As he shifted his right hand on Kyle’s left wrist, a texture caught his attention.

The elastic bandage. Of course. He’d noticed it earlier, when they were stuck in the alcove. He’d forgotten.

Stan worried about what had happened, but he forced himself not to say anything. He knew Kyle wouldn’t appreciate it. Besides, he could ask later. Now was not the time.

Stan immediately released his left arm.

“No, no, no,” protested Kyle, though he was still visibly wrapped up in the pain. He reached up to grab Stan’s hand back, but Stan refused to let Kyle put himself through any more hurt. To compensate, Stan tightened his grip on Kyle’s right arm, and pushed it firmly against the

mattress. He took Kyle's left hand in his right, curling Kyle's fingers into his palm. He kissed the back of Kyle's hand, just above where the elastic bandage stopped.

Stan looked into Kyle's eyes. He gingerly brought Kyle's hand up to his shoulder, silently asking Kyle to hold onto him. Without protest, Kyle latched onto Stan's shoulder like a lifeline, his fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt.

They settled together again, pressing their lips in little kisses as their movements resumed. Between kisses, Stan spoke.

"We're in this together," he said, his voice low and soft. Kyle's eyes opened, unfocused and hazy from their activities. Once more, their gazes met, and Stan said, "I love you."

Kyle's eyes dampened as he said, "I love you, too."

Chapter End Notes

Link to the Psalm in English and Hebrew, for any interested: <https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt2623.htm>

what kyle and stan play is "Oyfn Pripetshik" -- a beautiful Yiddish song. i highly recommend giving it a listen. :)

next chapter will be posted on wednesday (december 19th)!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Mouths

Chapter Summary

They kept him sane.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Healthy light spread throughout the room from a cloudless sky. It was the type of bright you only got from wintertime, where the snow radiated the light back into the air and illuminated the world from the ground up.

Although the curtains weren't open, the light flooded in anyway. It caught the reflections on the smooth varnish of two guitars, and it cascaded betwixt shadows from an open closet. A desk chair threatened to spin from just the feeling of it; such a palpable presence wasn't common. That was something reserved for urban areas and towns that the general populous of America knew existed.

There was something beautiful about it — knowing that no one else outside of South Park realized it was a true place. They were unknown, sitting as dormant variables inside of a dormant room, in a dormant town, in a dormant state.

Stan used to make a point of not thinking about the rest of the world. It just made him sad, and it made him small. The monumental size of the universe frightened him, giving him the hopeless notion that he, and any other individual he would ever meet, was just an ant among something so much bigger. The nihilistic part of his brain, however, argued with that. *The universe is not big*, it told him. *It's just a thing that exists*.

That part of his brain — the nihilistic part, the part that did so many things he didn't realize he needed to do — was able to be quashed. The tinier part of him — the whispering, shy part of him, the part of him that made the most of every situation when faced with other people — could overcome the adversity his bigger self impressed upon it.

And, although it was only for a minute, Stan felt proud.

He woke up to that, his brain still hazily looping in little whirls and twirls of half-dreams. He opened his eyes, met with the light from the window and the shines from the room. His proprioception returned, and the smell of campfires and smoke and snow greeted him. It was the smell of Kyle, curled up in his arms like they'd never be close again.

Stan rubbed his eyes. His shirtless torso was cold, and he gently snuggled even closer to Kyle to steal some of his body heat. At some point last night, Kyle had shucked the jacket off with a certain vigor. His shirt remained on his body, however, along with his boxer briefs, so a

good portion of his modesty was still intact. Stan, on the other hand, only wore his boxers and socks. It left him bare and open for the world to hurt him, but he'd never been insanely self-conscious around Kyle.

Stan didn't know how long he watched Kyle sleep. However long it was, he easily could have continued far longer. The relaxation that hovered over Kyle's entire body as he slept held purity and peace beyond anything else Stan had ever known. He found it beautiful.

The time eventually came when Kyle awoke. When it arrived, it came about slowly. The tension started in his neck, and rose until he was stretching his arms out in front of him. He pressed his back against Stan, trying to get as close as possible. Stan's hold on Kyle's waist tightened protectively, and he buried his face against the back of Kyle's neck. Wakefulness itched in Kyle's fingers, but the only movement that happened after his stretch was a very minimal adjustment. He brought his hand up to rest over Stan's arm. He rubbed his thumb against the skin of Stan's elbow.

In the light, the unmistakable elastic bandage glared up at Stan. The clips holding it tight on Kyle's arm glittered. It was too pretty, for what it was.

More time passed, and then Kyle rolled over to face Stan. Their noses almost touched in the close proximity. As if it were second nature, they kissed each other good morning.

Stan removed his hand from Kyle's waist to instead caress Kyle's cheek. He spread his thumb underneath Kyle's eye, where the dark circles looked like they were fading.

"You're beautiful," was the first thing Stan said that morning. Instead of responding verbally, Kyle hid a smile with his hand and scooted closer, hooking a leg over Stan's hip.

They lingered. Their limbs were paralyzed, buzzing with the loveliness of being so close. Their bodies radiated heat and comfort into each other, making them feel like this was all they would ever need. It was more than enough, for Stan. He wouldn't complain if this was how he spent his last day on Earth. Talking felt foreign, but not uncomfortable.

"How are you feeling?" Stan asked.

Kyle smiled again, though this time he didn't hide it. Stan loved his smile. He loved his everything, but his smile was infectious in the most fantastic way. He wanted to kiss that smile into permanence on Kyle's lips. "Sore," Kyle responded jokingly. Stan snorted, glancing away sheepishly.

"Sorry about that."

"It's fine."

A few seconds later, Stan rerouted. "How are you feeling — like, emotionally?"

It took a little while for Kyle to respond to that one. Eventually, he said, "I'm feeling big."

And Stan replied, "big?"

“Big,” confirmed Kyle, “like I could conquer the world.”

As far as Stan was concerned, Kyle could conquer the world. He almost felt sentimental enough to tell him as much, but he managed to hold back. Or, perhaps, something inside of him told him to hold back. This was something fragile, he felt; this was something he needed to handle with care. He never wanted to lose what they’d managed to gain, and he never wanted to give up on the concept of them.

Even so, he felt the need to talk. There were things he needed answers to, and there were things that needed to be aired to dry. Further, there were things he was curious about, and things he was concerned about. He would never forgive himself if he rolled over and continued to ignore the things that tried to burn holes into his memory.

He was gentle when he spoke next. His hand moved to trace an invisible design on the elastic bandage Kyle wore. “What happened to your arm?” he asked, preparing himself for the worst. Kyle looked at him for a second, unprepared.

“I fell,” said Kyle.

Stan didn’t know if he believed Kyle, but he knew that he trusted him, and he didn’t want to ruin that. His skepticism chewed on his tongue. He forced himself to be honest. “I’m worried about it,” he admitted, tracing another pattern along Kyle’s wrist. “It’s probably just me being paranoid, but... I can’t help it, I...”

Kyle watched him, listening. Talking about it was almost too much to bear. It felt weak, like he was admitting to something morally apprehensible.

“I tried to hurt myself,” he finally muttered. He stopped tracing the little patterns. “If Kenny weren’t there to stop me, I honestly don’t know what would have happened.”

With eyes full of understanding, Kyle whispered, “what did you try to do?”

Stan answered with, “I tried to cut myself with a broken mug.”

Kyle’s expression softened in empathy. He reached up to drape his arm around Stan’s neck, and pressed their foreheads together. The tips of their noses bumped. “I’m glad you didn’t,” he whispered.

“Me, too,” Stan said. Something in Kyle’s eyes tugged painfully, like he knew Stan was lying. If he suspected such a thing, however, he said nothing about it. He buried his face against Stan’s shoulder, and Stan wrapped both of his arms around Kyle’s waist. They rolled together, until Stan lay on his back with Kyle on top of him.

The elastic bandage caught on Kyle’s shirt.

Again, Stan asked him, “what happened to your arm?”

Kyle whispered little breaths against Stan’s shoulder, until he pulled away to say, “it’s dumb.”

“I won’t laugh, I promise,” replied Stan. Kyle gave him a look. “What? I swear. It probably isn’t even that dumb, anyway.”

Kyle slowly sat up on Stan’s lap, straddling his hips. He looked down at Stan, his palms pressed against the mattress at either side of Stan’s head. He drew in a deep breath. “My dad ended up taking me to the hospital after my hypoglycemic episode,” Kyle began, shifting his weight off of his injured arm. “I don’t remember if I told you about that.”

“You didn’t,” Stan answered, “but Kenny did.”

Kyle nodded. “Right, well, I was so out of it by the time we got there, that I...” he sat up straight, bearing most of his bodyweight down on Stan’s thighs. He rolled his arm, examining the elastic bandage. With a little smile, he said, “I forgot to take my arm out of the car before I shut the door. Obviously I didn’t *break* it or anything — it’s just... bruised, and stuff. And it hurts.”

“No kidding,” replied Stan. He thought back to last night, when he’d pressed Kyle’s arms so tightly down onto the mattress. No wonder Kyle had reacted so sharply to the contact; the injury was pretty damn fresh, and if it was like most bruises, it was probably more sore *now* than it had been when he first got it. “I’m sorry I pinned you down.”

“What?” Kyle made a weird face. “Why? Dude, I asked you to, don’t apologize for that.”

“I know, I just...” Stan absentmindedly slipped his fingertips under the right leg of Kyle’s boxer briefs. He played with the hem. “I wish I knew it would hurt you before I did it, because then I wouldn’t have... like, been so rough, at least.”

“Oh, please,” scoffed Kyle, crossing his arms over his chest. “If you call that rough, I’d hate to see what you call gentle.”

Stan blinked, surprised. “What.”

“You were touching me like I was on the verge of breaking,” Kyle said. He reached up to comb his fingers through his hair. When he saw the look on Stan’s face, he quickly backtracked. “Not that that’s a bad thing! I’m not saying you didn’t do well — the opposite, actually, you were...”

A smile spread on Kyle’s mouth, warm in remembrance.

“...really good,” he continued, breathy. “Like, really, *really* good.”

Stan could feel himself start to blush. Kyle’s own cheeks had faded into a soft rouge — and as soon as he realized what he was saying, he cleared his throat.

“But that’s beside the point,” added Kyle quickly, shaking his head free of whatever visuals had surfaced. “My *point* is, I’m not, like... fragile, or anything. So... you can be rough with me, next time. If you want.”

Subconsciously, Stan knew he should latch onto that constructive criticism as a whole; he wanted to know what Kyle liked, and he wanted him to feel good. Of course he did. But then

there was that little detail — the bit Kyle had said like it was nothing. Slowly, Stan asked, “next time?”

With a strange, hesitant look on his face, Kyle bit at his lip anxiously. “Um, yeah, next — shit, wait, do you want there to be a next time? I just kind of assumed — ”

“Kyle,” said Stan, pushing himself up onto his elbows. Kyle shifted on his lap, lifting his weight off of Stan’s thighs. Suddenly, feeling began to return to his lower half. He hadn’t even realized Kyle was cutting off his circulation. He drew in a small breath as pins and needles peppered down his legs. After a second, he continued. “Of course I want to, I just — y’know, I didn’t know if...”

They both fell silent and stared at each other in the lingering awkwardness. Neither boy was sure of what to say, or how to continue the topic without embarrassment.

A few minutes passed, before Stan abruptly cleared his throat and asked, “stick a pin in it?”

“Agreed,” answered Kyle. Another second of silence passed, before they looked at each other, nodded all businesslike, and separated. Kyle slid off of Stan’s lap and stood, trying to find his pants among the disheveled nature of the floor.

Stan narrowly avoided kicking the side of his guitar when he swung his legs over the side of his bed. He grabbed the first pair of jeans he saw, tugging them on.

“Dude.” Stan looked up at Kyle when addressed. Kyle was giving him this look, like Stan was being a total idiot. “My pants.”

Confused, Stan asked, “what?”

“My pants,” Kyle repeated, gesturing exasperatedly at the jeans Stan had pulled on. “You pilfered my pants.”

“I — ” immediately, Stan glanced down at his legs. Sure enough, the jeans were not his own. They were a much more oceanic blue than the ones he frequently wore. Embarrassed, he quickly pulled them off. “Shit, sorry, I was wondering why they were tight.”

“You do have a pretty Germanic bone structure,” noted Kyle, shrugging. He gratefully took the pair of jeans when Stan handed them back.

Stan quirked a brow. “The hell does that mean?”

“You have a wider build.” Kyle slipped his pants on. He fumbled with the zipper for a second, before foregoing it to button them first. Stan wandered over to his dresser. He dug through the drawers, pulling out a haphazardly-matched outfit.

“Dude, did you just call me fat?”

Kyle’s jacket crackled as he slipped it on, making sure to keep careful with his injured arm. “What?” he asked. He furrowed his brows, his hands settling on his hips casually. “Did I say

you were fat? No, I did not. I said you have a wider build. Like, bone structure. Germanic. It's a thing."

"Okay, so just to be clear..." Stan paused to tug his shirt on. "You're not comparing me to Cartman?"

Although Kyle laughed at the reference to Eric, he overall rolled his eyes. "No, Stan, I'm not comparing you to Cartman, because you're not." He ran his fingers through his hair, separating sections of curls and brushing it as neat as possible. His hair only served to frizz, however, and it visibly irritated him.

Stan smiled, trying to make sure the point got across that he was being lighthearted and joking. Kyle wasn't looking at him, however, and Stan decided to simply drop it. He lowered his gaze, slipping into the pair of pants he'd taken out.

His stomach cramped. When was the last time he'd eaten? A day ago? He sure as hell hadn't eaten anything yesterday.

He should definitely...

"Just breathe, dude, you're not Cartman."

Bewilderment settled over Stan at Kyle's muttering, and he lifted his head, turning to look at him straight-on. Strangely enough, Kyle seemed to be in his own little world, with the side of his hand pressed against his chapped lips. Although he was almost certain he'd heard what Kyle had said, he wanted to make sure. "What was that?" asked Stan.

Kyle snapped up, his eyes wide like a deer in the headlights. He quickly recovered, shaking his head. "Nothing, don't worry about it."

"...okay."

Stillness. Stagnant dust remained placated in the air around them; Stan could see it in the blocks of light still shedding through the windowpanes. Things felt a lot more official now that they were dressed, and he wondered if that was just a *him being weird* thing, or if it was a legitimate feeling both of them were privy to. Stan rubbed the heel of his palm against the side of his thigh.

"So, um," he said, incapable of dealing with the silence anymore, "I can make a mean omelet, if you want one."

Kyle's expression relaxed significantly. "Did you just say you can make a *mean* omelet?"

"What, do you want a friendly one?" asked Stan. "Because I can make it work. It just won't have as much of a punch."

"If that was your attempt at a pun, you need help," Kyle snorted.

"What? You gonna punish me?" Kyle smacked Stan on the shoulder as he passed him to leave the room. Stan rubbed at his stinging arm. "Ow..."

“Don’t be gay like that,” was all Kyle said. He disappeared down the hallway, and Stan peeked out of the room to see where he was going. Before entering the bathroom, Kyle turned, looking to Stan. “Is it cool if I shower quick?”

“Go for it,” returned Stan. Kyle gave him a thumbs-up and disappeared into the bathroom.

A smile lingered on Stan’s face even longer than it needed to. There was a feeling. He was feeling *something* that was so wonderful, that made him feel so full, that made everything look *bright*, like he was finally awake after being asleep for so long. It was a shift, something that let him know everything was going to be okay. He felt motivated to finish all of that outstanding homework he’d been slacking on; an admiration of Kyle’s work ethic made him think, *I can do that, too*.

Stan went downstairs and headed into the kitchen. Immediately, he gathered the ingredients for omelets. Eggs? Check. Cheese? Check. Ham and an assortment of random other toppings? Well, sort of. Stan didn’t feel like bothering with cutting pieces of ham, so he decided to forgo it. They did have those little bacon bits that his dad liked to put on salads, though. He set them aside. With all of the foodstuffs out of the way, Stan grabbed a pan and went to work on breakfast.

The eggs sizzled as they cooked. Little bubbles of air rose to the surface and popped, giving off rapid snaps. Something about the noise itself irked him just the slightest bit. He usually liked those types of noises, though admittedly he’d only ever heard something similar in bubble wrap. Eggs cooking was not the same as bubble wrap.

He didn’t remember the sound bothering him before. Then again, he barely remembered the last time he’d actually made an omelet. He hadn’t cooked in a while. When was the last time he’d done this? When he was ten?

Stan rubbed the memories of the past few years away from his eyes. He slid the finished omelet onto a plate.

I should take my medication.

Shit. He should, shouldn’t he? He glanced towards the ceiling, contemplating the pros and cons of going to do that. His pills were in the bathroom, though, and Kyle was still showering; he could hear the water running.

I’ll do it later.

Stan switched his attention back to cooking.

In the midst of his thoughts, he grabbed an onion. He pulled out a cutting board, and a knife, and began to dice it. The effect was immediate, of course. He’d always been incredibly sensitive to whatever poison onions exude when cut. That’s what he blamed his hatred for them on. They remorselessly made him cry.

But Kyle liked onions, so he’d suffer through it.

The burning remained even after he'd washed and gotten rid of all the evidence. Hell, the tingle continued even when he was plating Kyle's omelet. It only disappeared once he left the kitchen to take a breather in the living room, where the air was significantly fresher. Slowly, he recovered.

Kyle didn't take too long after that to finish in the shower, and when he finally came down, it became apparent that he wasn't keen on wearing his own clothes two days in a row. He hadn't brought a spare outfit, however, so he'd resulted to grabbing something of Stan's. They were a little loose on Kyle, but it was just barely noticeable. The two were close enough in size that they could share without it being too much of an issue.

"Dude," Kyle said, stepping off of the landing. His brows furrowed as he looked at Stan, examining something. "Were you crying?"

Embarrassed, Stan quickly rubbed at his eyes with the side of his arm. "No!" he responded, standing himself up straight. He sniffed, subconsciously, which probably didn't help his case. Kyle cocked his head, disbelieving. "I swear, I wasn't crying, I was just cutting onions."

"Oh my god," Kyle groaned. "First the internet, and now *you*?"

"What? No, I was literally cutting onions, I made omelets."

Shocked, Kyle asked, "wait, you literally made omelets?"

Stan didn't need to answer. Kyle entered the kitchen decidedly, and made an interesting noise in the back of his throat when he saw the table was set for the two of them. Stan followed him in, hovering over his shoulder in observance of what Kyle was observing.

"You made breakfast," Kyle said.

"Astute observation," replied Stan.

"I thought you were kidding," muttered Kyle, his eyes still wide. Stan was starting to get a little nervous. Maybe he shouldn't have made food? He didn't exactly know how long Kyle was staying.

"I wasn't," Stan said hesitantly.

Kyle turned to him. "You," he said, poking Stan in the shoulder, "are chivalrous as fuck."

"I'm not *chivalrous*," replied Stan.

"Would you prefer the term neighborly?"

"Depends, can I make references from *The Simpsons*?"

Kyle scoffed at just the concept. "Looks like you're gonna have to settle for being chivalrous."

As Kyle sat down at the kitchen table, Stan tried to wrap his head around the logistics of his side of the argument. Where was the upside for him? He left all of the control up to Kyle there. Christ, his bartering skills needed some serious work.

Stan made to sit down across from Kyle, but stopped just after pulling his chair out.

“Oh,” he said, pushing his chair back in. He made his way over to the cupboard, where he retrieved two cups — plastic. He didn’t feel like dealing with mugs today. He turned back to Kyle, who glanced up at him in the middle of cutting his omelet. “Would you like anything to drink? We got orange juice, milk, and coffee.”

Kyle moved to reach for something in his pocket, but stopped short when he realized these were not his pants. He cleared his throat. “Uh — just water is fine, but I can get it myself — ”

“Nope.” Stan gestured for Kyle to sit back down, even as he was in the middle of pushing his chair out. “I can get it, I’m already up.”

Kyle looked at him warily. “Are you sure?” he asked. He picked at a nick in the side of his plate. “I can — ”

“It’s fine,” insisted Stan. He smiled, holding up one of the cups he’d grabbed. “I don’t mind. Just eat and don’t stress about it, okay?”

Something uncertain crossed Kyle’s face, though he obeyed Stan’s request nonetheless. Stan was glad for that. He didn’t want Kyle to be up and wandering around. Last night was slowly coming back, along with tidbits of the past week. Knowing what Kyle had been dealing with, Stan just wanted to be able to take care of him. Kyle wouldn’t like it, but it was more than likely what he’d need, whether he would admit it or not.

“Hey, Kyle,” Stan said, setting the newly-filled cup of ice water next to Kyle’s plate. Kyle glanced up, chewing through one of the tiniest bites Stan might have ever seen him take. It hurt to see. Stan sat down. “Why...”

Stan swallowed, trying to maneuver this topic as gently as possible.

“Why weren’t you eating?” he asked. And then, as if clarification was needed: “Before?”

Kyle stilled. He swallowed the small amount of food in his mouth, and paused to sip some of the water. Even as he busied himself with little actions, he had a look on his face like he was contemplating his own words extremely carefully. He set the cup down, and fidgeted with the end of the fork, running his fingers over the prongs. “I was really overwhelmed,” he finally began, studying the table intently. “And...”

Kyle’s gaze flicked up at Stan, as if asking for permission. Stan nodded for him to continue, silent.

“I forgot,” he blurted. He was back to staring at the table. “To eat, I... it wasn’t that big of a deal, at first? But then it got... dangerous.”

Stan remained quiet for a minute, until he realized Kyle wouldn't continue without prompting. "How do you mean?"

"I just — " another cut. Kyle rubbed the side of his neck, like it was sore. "The next day, when I woke up after not eating, I mean... I felt like shit, but at the same time, I was..."

Kyle squeezed his eyes shut for a second.

"Really... weirdly proud of it," he admitted, quiet. "Having controlled what I ate, I mean. I was proud of myself for not giving into something. It was, like, weirdly empowering."

Concern radiated from Stan's stomach; a weird establishment of sympathy.

"It was scary," Kyle whispered. "Really, really scary, like — because, I could see myself in the future for a second, and I loved the way it felt, to know I could control the outcome of something so physical with just mental strength, and I wanted to keep *not eating* even though it could literally kill me, and then..."

Silence. Kyle picked up the fork and poked at the omelet. Kyle forced himself to chuckle.

"Well, you saw what happened," he finished. Stan nodded, slow and hesitant and wary of everything he'd just heard. He'd never thought about food like that before, so it was a strange thing for him to hear that perspective from someone he was so close to.

"How are you feeling? Like, about it, right now?"

Kyle cut the omelet into even smaller pieces. Stan wanted to tell him to stop doing that — to just eat it, please, please eat it —, but he refrained from speaking. He knew Kyle probably needed to take things at his own pace. It was just really frightening to leave that up to someone who had... issues with it, apparently, that hadn't been there before.

Stan hated it. He hated the fact that it made sense. He hated the fact that it explained the weight loss.

"I don't want to eat this," Kyle mumbled, laughing like it was an offensive joke that he was unsure of. He speared a small piece of omelet with his fork, and just... looked at it. He lifted his head, then, and looked at Stan, a smile on his face. "But I'm going to."

With that, Kyle finally began to eat. He was slow, and he was careful — and his pace was stunted. He took bites out of the tiny pieces he'd cut, like he would choke if he ate too much too quickly. Eventually, he slowed to a stop, and Stan's blood froze in his veins.

"Stop watching me eat, man, it's freaking me out," Kyle said, his expression pulled. He gestured towards Stan's plate. "Eat your own food."

Stan flushed. He hadn't even realized he was watching Kyle eat. He quickly turned his attention to his own food, and began eating after apologizing softly under his breath.

They laughed about the awkwardness of it. Stan couldn't help but feel like he was obligated to say something, like *I'm glad you're eating* or *Please don't skip anymore meals*, but he

knew it probably wouldn't do much good. Kyle seemed to be recovering from this... *thing*, on his own. Stan talking about it probably wouldn't be helpful, and might just come across as annoying.

Halfway through breakfast, something else pulled at Stan's brain. He tried to get it to go away, but he couldn't. His concerned curiosity was too much to force silent. "Kyle," he said, and Kyle responded with a soft hum. "What... happened, to your mom?"

Kyle stopped mid-bite.

"You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to," Stan added quickly. "It's just... you said she was in the hospital, and... yeah. But you never said why she's there."

Kyle didn't look up from his food, and his eating pace sped up just the slightest. His eyes flicked over something in his mind, though it looked like he was examining something on the table. Stan waited, and when he figured he might not receive a reply, he buried himself back into his own meal.

But then, the silence was gone.

"Pneumonia," Kyle said, his voice dry. He cleared his throat. He set the fork down and took a sip of water. "She got pneumonia back in December, and eventually it got bad enough to go to the hospital for. We thought it'd pass, but, well, it— it obviously didn't. She's just been getting worse, and then last night, I guess..."

The emotion came all of a sudden, like Kyle hadn't realized what he was talking about until now. He choked, shutting his eyes tightly and pressing his hand against his mouth to keep himself from crying. Stan stiffened, ready to drop everything and go into comfort mode. Then, Kyle started laughing, even as tears gathered in the corners of his eyes.

"Why am I crying? For fuck's sake, I should be over this by now," he heaved through shallow chuckles. He wiped his eyes free of the dampness. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, holy shit..."

"Dude, don't apologize," Stan said, his voice soft. Kyle sniffed, looking at him. "It's okay to get emotional about this shit, Kyle, it's a really hard thing to deal with. It's not something you can just get over in a few days."

"I know, I just — " Kyle sniffed again, rubbing his eyes more harshly. "I wish it didn't have to be like this, y'know?"

Stan felt his expression shift in sympathy. He might not understand exactly what Kyle was going through, but he understood what grief could do to someone. He'd been somewhere similar. Honestly? He still wasn't totally over it. He doubted he ever would be.

Slowly, Stan moved to the chair immediately next to Kyle, rather than the one across the table from him. He scooted as close as possible, and leaned, wrapping his arm over Kyle's hunched shoulders. He pulled Kyle towards him, and Kyle allowed him to.

Kyle leaned against Stan's shoulder, gripping at his shirt softly.

“My mom used to sing to me,” Kyle croaked. He heaved another laugh; Stan understood it wasn’t out of humor. It was out of pain. It was out of struggle to understand and comprehend the situation. Stan held him tighter. Kyle continued with a thick voice. “When I was really little, I mean, like when I was still in diapers. She’d sing me Yiddish songs as lullabies. She stopped when I was old enough to be embarrassed by it, but I always missed it.”

Stan hummed for him to continue.

“I always missed it,” Kyle repeated, shaky. “I don’t remember most of them, but one of them I loved so much, I learned how to play it on the guitar.”

Stan stroked his fingers through Kyle’s still-damp hair. He had a feeling he knew where Kyle was going with this. The tune of last night’s impromptu guitar duet was still fresh in his mind. They’d played it so many times.

“We went to visit her last night,” said Kyle, “and I was singing it to her. In my head, obviously, because Ike and my dad were there, and I wasn’t about to fucking sing in front of them.”

Kyle laughed, and Stan did, too. Hearing that, Kyle relaxed.

“But then her oxygen stats started to go down, and the machines started beeping...” Kyle’s breath hitched. “I was holding her hand, Stan, I was holding her hand as the red light on the monitor was flashing, I panicked, I fucking — I panicked, and I ran.”

Stan’s chest squeezed so heartbreakingly tight. He could feel Kyle’s resolve cracking as he held him; he could feel his shattered breaths. He was practically holding Kyle up at this point. It hurt to see him like this. He was dealing with his own emotions about this whole thing. Mrs. Broflovski might have been over the top, but she was a really nice woman. He’d never imagined pneumonia would...

“I ran to you,” Kyle whispered. “And it was, like — like the song was on repeat in my brain. It was stuck in my head, and it was freaking me out, and the only way I knew how to get it to stop was to play it, to hear it, to — ”

Kyle scrabbled at the fabric of Stan’s shirt.

“ — you’re the only one I know who has a guitar,” he continued, “and you’re really good at playing, and I trust you...”

Kyle was beginning to lose his composure at that point. Stan could feel it in the way he was struggling to avoid shivering. “I understand,” Stan said quietly, smoothing Kyle’s hair back. It bounced back into place. His curls were unruly, even when damp. “I’m so sorry you’re going through this.”

Kyle bit back a tiny sob and said nothing. His grip on Stan tightened infinitesimally. Neither boy spoke. They understood the strength the silence around them held; they understood how helpful something so full of nothing could be.

It took a while for Kyle to recover. Even after just holding each other for a good few minutes, he still wasn't back to normal. Eventually, they'd pulled away from each other to finish their breakfast. Once they were done eating, Stan gathered the dishes and set them in the sink. Kyle lingered at the kitchen table, unsure of himself and imagining being somewhere else. Stan could see it in his eyes. Kyle wasn't really there.

Kyle stayed for another few hours. His hair dried as they went through the early afternoon together, numbing their minds with video games from their old consoles and joking listlessly about things they hardly cared about. Things were friendly, and things were safe, and Stan would be lying if he said that wasn't enough for him. Because it was. It was more than enough.

The company was all he needed, really, and he had a feeling Kyle felt the same.

At some point, they ended up on Stan's bedroom floor. They had propped the guitars on Stan's bed, and simply lay with each other, backs on the carpet and eyes turned towards the ceiling. They hadn't spoken in twenty minutes.

It was just them, the fading light, and the individual universes they carried on their shoulders. The outside world didn't matter. Nothing mattered outside of the everything they created together.

"What does this mean for us?" Stan eventually blurted, his palms curled against the stiff texture underneath him. The threads bore shadows against his skin. Kyle shrugged.

"I don't know," he admitted.

Stan contemplated that. He supposed it was okay. Not knowing was fine, right? They'd gone through plenty of things without knowing how they would end, and every single time, it ended up okay. They'd made it this far, and the only things certain in life were death and taxes. Stan considered that an achievement, in his book.

Then again, he needed the little things. They kept him sane.

"Will you go out with me?" asked Stan.

Silence.

Anxiety.

Then:

"Stan."

Stan looked over. Kyle stared back at him, expression pained and guilty. Stan wanted to stop everything. He wanted to halt their universes, and he wanted to rewind until he found the place before he'd asked it. He wanted to fast-forward and get to the part where Kyle said yes. He wanted to make a million little stupid decisions and drown in the repercussions, because at least then he'd be safe, buried in a pool of his own regrets.

“I want to be with you,” Kyle said to him. “I really, really do.”

Stan knew what was coming. The anticipation hurt him more than the knowledge of what it was. “So be with me,” he replied, perhaps a little desperately. “Be my boyfriend.”

Kyle frowned. “It’s not that simple.”

Nothing is ever that simple.

“There’s too much going on in my life right now,” explained Kyle. He rolled onto his side, and Stan did, too. They faced each other, just under a foot apart. “I can’t focus on a relationship, Stan — it wouldn’t be fair to you.”

Stan wanted to say *I don’t care*. Because, overall, he didn’t. Kyle could treat him like shit, and he still wouldn’t leave him, because he loved him. Because he’s so much more than just a friend. Because he takes up his whole heart.

Because, because, because.

Kyle reached forward and took Stan’s hand in his own, holding it tightly between them. It made Stan’s entire body feel so beautifully full.

“Maybe in the future,” Kyle suggested, “when things aren’t as crazy, and we’re not... fragile. Maybe in college, or maybe...”

He stopped short, his tongue wetting his cracked lips. It hurt Stan to watch him do that. Stan wanted to kiss him, wanted to hold him, wanted to be close to him forever. Wanted, wanted, wanted.

“I want to be with you,” Kyle assured him, like Stan might have forgotten. “I really, really do, I really do. I just need some time. Please.”

And then Kyle stroked Stan’s cheek with his free hand. It was a gesture that was so unbelievably the opposite of what friends did with each other. Stan struggled to figure out how they were supposed to go back. Stan couldn’t... understand, but — but at the same time, he...

“I want to make sure I’m good to you,” Kyle said.

Stan understood completely.

That hurt him.

It hurt him so much.

It hurt him so so so much.

Kyle left a few hours after that, and they still hadn’t recovered from each other. They’d somehow managed to pick up the habit of holding hands, which Stan found peculiar, and it

was horribly difficult to let go of each other as Kyle tugged his coat back on. His ushanka was pushed back onto his head, covering his bright red curls.

An urge shuddered through Stan, to rip Kyle's hat off and run his fingers through that hair, and kiss him.

Stan didn't do that.

Kyle kicked his shoes on, and zipped up his coat, and looked at Stan.

"Are you sure?" Stan said before Kyle could walk out the door. No explanation was needed. They both just knew. They both just knew.

Kyle did not speak. Instead, he stepped forward, closing the distance between himself and Stan.

Kyle reached up, took Stan's face in his hands, pulled him closer. Their lips brushed, and then pressed, and their eyes closed, and no one breathed. Kyle lead them through the most passionate kiss Stan will ever have in his life.

When they pulled away, it was with reluctance. Kyle kept Stan's head pulled close, and he pressed their foreheads together. Stan held Kyle's waist, trying to memorize the feeling of him so close.

"I'm sure," Kyle whispered.

"I'll wait for you," Stan said.

Kyle just smiled.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be posted on sunday, december 23rd!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Intermission V

Chapter Summary

I'm so, so sorry.

My body feels a little numb.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I'm starting to hate numbers.

Stan,

I want to start this out by saying that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for snapping at you, I'm sorry for pushing you away, I'm sorry for being so angry, I'm sorry for worrying you. I'm sorry.

I'm so, so sorry.

I don't know how to segue properly into this next part, so I'm just going to leap in.

When you first had sex with Wendy, did you feel wrong? Like you'd just broken something inherently ingrained into your system?

What about with me? Did you feel dirty?

I hate to say it. I hate that I feel like this, but I can't help it. I just need to get this out into the open. I need to be honest, even if that honesty comes in the form of a stupid letter.

After we... y'know. After the thing, I felt weird.

And I don't mean just physically. Like, obviously physically it's going to feel different. I think that might be a part of it, too, though? Like, I think I got so used to my body being *my body* that I completely disregarded the idea that someone *else* could do anything so raw with it. It was weird to realize another person could make me feel so good.

I digress.

I didn't feel much immediately after, because we both fell asleep pretty quickly, but when we woke up...

It was like there was a shift. I don't know. Something deep in me had changed. Like, I could feel something was different. Again, not specifically physically, but...

I don't know. What's the right word? Spiritually? Mentally? Emotionally?

I just know it felt weird.

I felt dirty.

And it sucks, because I trust you, and now that I think about it, that feeling still lingers. It's so strange. It feels kind of like my body wasn't prepared for what it went through. It feels like I did something I wasn't physically or emotionally prepared for, and now I'm freaking out because the subconscious part of my brain is telling me to be as close to you as possible, but at the same time my logical brain is repeating this stupid mantra of *what did I do what did I do what did I do*?

My body feels a little numb.

Did you feel that way, your first time? I know I already asked that, but I really need an answer. I need reassurance. I need to know this isn't just a me thing. I need to know it wasn't wrong. I need to know that we actually *belong* together, and it was just a stupid first-time anxiety thing, and not the universe (or, my body) telling me that we aren't supposed to be together. That I might not be attracted to guys.

Because, I don't know if I can deal with that. I don't want to be uncomfortable like this. I don't want to feel the urge to run and hide every time we try to be intimate, if...

We ever do it again.

I'm not saying you did badly. I'm not saying that at all. You were great. You were so much more than I have ever deserved. You were so focused. You were so gentle. You were so sweet.

I just need to think.

And I think I just need some time.

Why aren't you writing back? Please write back. Please. I'm sorry.

I love you.

Sincerely,
your super-best-friend Kyle.

Chapter End Notes

next update will be posted on sunday, december 23rd!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

White Flag

Chapter Summary

No going back now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Happy.

That was his first thought on the following Monday. He woke up feeling refreshed, with a certain satisfaction to the way his life was heading. Hope sparked something new inside of him, the likes of which he'd not had the privilege of feeling in years. It gave him energy, which lifted him out of bed as soon as the first ding of his alarm started to sound. Instead of turning it off immediately, Stan allowed the podcast to play. It created a simple background noise to what he busied himself with that morning. After he'd finished up in his bedroom, however, Stan turned it off. He didn't want to disturb either of his parents, if they so heard through the walls.

His shower was quick and simple. He ended up stealing some of his mother's conditioner this time around, which helped in dealing with the knots that resulted from the mild wave he'd gained after the onset of puberty. Furthermore, it allowed his hair a certain silkiness that he couldn't help but run his fingers through after he dried off. He stole a glance towards his phone as he hit the home button, and when it read that he still had forty minutes to spare, he decided to go the extra mile. *Fuck it*, he thought, tying the towel around his hips and plugging in the hairdryer. If asked, Stan would not be able to directly answer what it was that had gotten into him. There was just something so obvious about wanting to look nice. It took him twenty minutes to dry his hair, but he ultimately decided it was wholly worth it. He carded his fingers gently through the locks of black atop his head, feeling the soft against his skin. It had fluffed nicely, he'd admit. He was not disappointed.

Stan even dressed nicely. He forewent the overly-worn sweater in favor of a newer long-sleeved shirt, and tugged on one of the nicest pairs of jeans that he owned. No rips or stains or marks of questionable origin were visible anywhere, and maybe it was a little silly, but he felt proud of himself that he'd managed so much on such a seemingly ordinary morning. It was like a switch had flipped on. Pleasant feelings warmed his chest and forced him to smile, even if there was no true external reason to. He just felt. He just *felt*. He felt so many things, internal and external, and he could safely say that all of them were good.

He felt clean — truly, truly clean — for the first time in forever.

Stan gathered his things together and walked down the steps with a particular lightness. He placed all of his stuff into his backpack, zipped up the various pockets, and trailed his way into the kitchen with the tail-end of a smile on his lips.

“You look nice today,” commented his mother, setting a plate of bacon and eggs down on the table before her husband. She tapped Randy on the shoulder. “Doesn’t he, Randy?”

Randy, whom had been distracted with the newspaper, glanced up in startled disarray from being addressed. “Huh?” he muttered, a heated coffee mug in his hand. He glanced Stan over with peculiar expression in his gaze. “Oh. Yeah. Something special going on?”

Stan slid into one of the chairs. It felt like forever since he’d actually sat down to eat a meal with anyone. It felt like it had been forever since he’d last felt normal. He wasn’t going to take it for granted. He was going to soak up every second that he could. He hardly wanted to blink. “No, I just wanted to put in some effort today,” he answered. He thanked his mother when she set a plate of breakfast before him.

“That’s good,” said Sharon, brushing her hands off on her apron. “It’s not a bad idea to put effort into your looks, once in a while.”

“Don’t wanna look like a bum, Stan,” Randy commented.

“Look like a bum?” replied Stan. He picked up a piece of bacon and began to gnaw on it. Christ, he was hungry. He barely remembered eating anything in the past month. He swallowed the bacon and took a sip of orange juice. “I didn’t look that bad.”

“You didn’t look bad,” his mother agreed. She sat down at the table with her own plate. “You just looked a little...”

“Homeless,” Randy said bluntly. Stan snorted, almost choking on his next bite of bacon.

“Randy,” hissed Sharon.

“What? It’s true. That sweater’s older than most of the things in this house.”

“That’s probably because you fixed everything in the house,” Stan retorted.

“Do you have a problem with the modern interior decoration?” Randy asked. Stan shook his head.

“No,” he answered. “It just explains why my sweater is older than the clocks.”

“I’m surprised that thing even still fit you after so many years,” Sharon broke in. She combed back a portion of her hair. “When did we buy that? When you were fourteen?”

Stan only shrugged, even though he knew exactly when he’d gotten the sweater. He’d treasured that thing. It was a little bittersweet to retire it after so long, but he ultimately had to agree with his father. The worn-down aesthetic of it was definitely contributing to his messy look. Now that he was more motivated to take care of himself again, though, he found it a good thing to leave it sit on his bed.

They ate in silence for a while, with everyone looking somewhere different in the room. Randy distracted himself with the newspaper, and Sharon paid attention to the plate of food. Stan kept track of all the movements outside of the living room window. It was calm. It was still. It was peaceful.

Stan felt good.

He glanced at the clock, trying to keep track of when he would need to leave to catch the bus. He wasn't in the mood to walk today. He wasn't sure why, but his asthma had been hitting him pretty hard over the head recently. If he stayed away from too much physical exertion in the cold, though, he should be okay. So, that's what he would do.

Stan stood when he finished, rinsing his dishes in the sink.

"Oh, that reminds me," Sharon suddenly said. Stan glanced over at her, a brow quirked. He watched as she grabbed something out of her purse, which had been in the empty chair next to her. It was a packet of papers, and she handed it towards Stan after he'd dried his hands off on the dishtowel. He took it, examining it with mild interest. "That's a list of all your outstanding assignments."

Stan's eyes widened. This was five pages of shit. Had he been slacking off that much?

"What's been going on?" she asked him, concern in her expression. "I know you've been struggling, lately. Is there something happening at school that's keeping you from doing your work?"

Her tone was both caring and sarcastic, like she wanted to keep the avenue open for discussion, but also wanted to make sure Stan understood the gravity of this situation.

"You're barely passing with Cs in all of your courses," she said. Stan could feel a subtle anxiety begin to build in his stomach, but he immediately pushed it away. *This is fine*, said his brain. *You can handle this*.

"It's fine," Stan said. He flipped the packet shut and rolled it in his hand for easier holding. Sharon's brows knitted together. "Don't worry, I'll take care of it. I got this."

Although obviously still concerned, Sharon didn't push the concept of him being secretly not okay. She glanced towards Randy, like he could help in this situation, and for once, he returned her look. Stan felt a little uneasy, watching them share an expression that he... honestly, had never seen before. Sharon turned back to Stan, and Randy looked at him, too. "Are you sure you're okay, Stanley?" she asked, her voice soft. Stan quirked a brow in confusion.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he answered. Hell — he was better than fine. He felt happy. It might sound lame, but it kind of made him want to cry. Instead, Stan smiled. "I gotta go catch the bus now. Thanks for breakfast, Mom."

Sharon smiled. "You're welcome."

Stan contemplated hugging her, but he decided that was a little much. He waved goodbye instead, and slowly made his way to the front door. He packed his stuff, shoving the packet into his backpack. He double-checked that he had his inhaler, and made sure he had aspirin in case he got another headache.

He kicked on his shoes, shrugged on his jacket, and hoisted his backpack over his shoulder. Fuck, it was heavy, wasn't it? Maybe he could get away with something new.

Stan dropped the rucksack back onto the floor, and crouched as he rustled through it. He thought of which classes he had today, tried to think back to all of the units he was in. Most of them were new, starting today. He didn't need old notes and worksheets. A thought came to him.

He took everything out of his backpack, shoved his phone and inhaler into his jacket pockets, and decided to completely forgo the aspirin. If he got a headache, he could deal with it. He wanted to feel as weightless as possible today.

When he stood up, the result was instantaneous. He'd never felt his backpack as weightless as it was at that moment. It was incredibly freeing, and he loved it. He said goodbye to his parents one last time, and left the house, carrying his backpack in his hand instead of over his shoulder.

Stan hesitated in the driveway, momentarily disoriented when he saw Kyle wasn't there. They usually at least walked to the bus stop together. Ultimately, though, Stan was unconcerned. Kyle probably needed space, and he was probably already at the stop. Stan had learned his lesson from the week before.

He lifted his backpack and slid an arm into one of the straps, deciding to carry it over his shoulder at the last second.

Kyle wasn't at the bus stop, though.

Stan thought he might be early, but then the bus rolled up, and he was the only one at the stop to get on. Although a little perplexed, Stan didn't let it get to him. Kyle was probably walking.

He plopped himself down in a seat near the front, since most of the ones in the back had been taken up. There were a couple at the very back that were open, but he didn't feel like maneuvering through the mess of legs that crowded the aisle.

The bus stuttered forward, and slowly accelerated down the main road in the neighborhood.

Not a minute later, the bus screeched to a premature halt. Stan felt himself lurch in his seat from the impromptu stop, and he barely managed to keep his backpack from falling off the seat next to him. The other kids didn't seem to notice the interruption. Feeling a little out of the loop, Stan glanced around. Then, the bus doors opened, and in walked his friends.

Eric came on first, followed by Kyle, and trailing quickly behind them was Kenny.

Stan immediately perked up. He held up a hand, waving to them, scooting himself and all of his stuff aside so one of them could sit with him in the seat. Eric torpedoed right on past him down the aisle, however, and Kyle followed. Having been cleared by two of his friends, Stan turned to look at Kenny.

Kenny stared fixedly at Kyle's back, completely disregarding everything else going on around him.

Stan followed the trio with his eyes, watching as they sat in the very back of the bus. Kyle sat next to Eric, and Kenny monopolized the single-person seat next to them.

Should I follow? Stan wondered, brows twitching down as he observed their interactions. He could barely hear them joking with each other, making lewd and deprecating jokes with and about each other. Before Stan could make a decision, the bus began to drive again, and Stan was forced to stay in the seat he was already in.

He turned to sit properly, and pulled his backpack up next to him again. That was fine. It's just one day — he'd sat alone before, it wasn't a big deal. He could deal with it. Another thought came to him.

Stan pressed his forehead against the frosting glass of the window, staring out at the blindingly white scenery just outside the metal box of kids. He watched as trees came and went, and soon found himself distracted by the cold against his skin. He traced patterns into the slowly reforming frost until his fingertips felt frozen.

"Jupiter!" bellowed Eric, letting out a series of wheezing laughs. "Get it guys? Get it? *Jew-piter?* Ha!"

"Shut up, fatass, that wasn't even funny!" Kyle replied, his volume rivaling Eric's.

"You know what, no, no, you're right," said Eric. Stan glanced towards the back of the bus. Eric cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Kyle, holocaust jokes are totally not cool, *Ann Frank*-ly, some people find them offensive."

More laughter erupted from Eric.

"C'mon, c'mon, you —" Eric snorted, clapping a hand over his mouth. He recovered quickly. "— you have to admit, you did *Nazi* that coming!"

Kyle's face became red. "That's not funny!"

"You're right, you're right, it's in poor taste," but Eric only laughed harder. "They're all overcooked!"

Oof.

Oof.

Stan slid down in his seat, even though something inside of him told him to go back and tell off Eric. He knew doing so wouldn't accomplish much. If anything, it could just spur him on

further. That was the whole reason Eric acted the way he did. He just wanted a reaction. He was a bully, however extreme.

The window frosted back over. Stan's fingers no longer felt frozen, and he reached up to trace some more designs. The frozen condensation collected against his fingertip as he pushed it against the surface. He withdrew his hand, spreading the substance over his finger. It melted rapidly, turning to water against his skin. He dried his hand against his pants.

Soon enough, he went back to tracing more dumb decals on the window. Juvenile as it was, it helped distract him from the boring bus ride he had in front of him. Fifteen minutes sure could feel like forever when you were alone.

He was disrupted by every stop. The bus would lurch, and he would stumble in his doodling, and the frost-lines against the window would end up shaky from his unsteady hand. On the last stop, Stan decided to quit tracing against the window. He wiped all of the frost off of the window with the sleeve of his jacket. He could see outside clearly now, and he found himself silently observing the final group of kids to be picked up for school. They sat in the very front, just a few seats in front of himself. Then the bus was back to driving.

Stan felt something in him squeeze when he saw Wendy.

She was only two seats ahead of him. Bebe sat with her, with an arm draped over Wendy's shoulders. She appeared to be comforting her, and Stan found himself lost at how that made him feel. He knew the odds of Wendy still being upset that he'd broken up with her were slim — it had happened almost five days ago, why would she still be sulking? Not to mention she'd never been one to sulk — but that didn't ease the soft ache that radiated from his chest. He felt like he should be there for her, even though everything in him said that he was definitely the last person she would want to see.

Five minutes was all it took for the bus to pull into the school's parking lot. Everyone stood before the bus had even come to a complete stop. The bus screeched. The force left people stumbling, but they were ultimately undeterred in their rapid exits. Very few people thanked the bus driver, and Stan made a mental note to thank him as he left. For now, though, he was stuck in his seat by an endless stream of people who were trying to get off.

He lingered a moment, even after he'd seen Kyle, Kenny, and Eric pass him by. In a random, last-ditch effort of exuding some of the tension that had built, Stan traced his finger through the reformed frost on the window for one last time. He exited the seat, and left a smiley face on the window in his place.

"Thank you," Stan said to the bus driver. The man, who Stan didn't think he'd ever actually said a word to before, smiled at him.

"You're welcome," he replied. Stan returned the smile and stepped off the bus.

His feet hit the sidewalk lightly, and for once he felt like he could manage through the day ahead of him without getting pissed off. He shoved his hands into his pockets and made his way inside, only slightly disappointed when he saw that his friends were nowhere to be seen.

Stan got halfway to his locker before he saw Wendy and Bebe again. A pang of the same feeling from earlier hit him, and immediately he began to slowly walk towards them. Bebe was getting something out of her locker when he finally approached.

“Hey,” he said, trying to be as casual as possible. Wendy spun around, the tail-end of a smile on her face. As soon as she saw Stan, though, her expression collapsed. Her brows furrowed, and her lips pursed. She looked about ready to say something, but Bebe broke in before any words could be shared.

“What are *you* doing here?” Bebe asked, her tone nothing but hostile. She slammed her locker shut and approached, hugging her books to her chest like they could be used as a weapon. Hell, they definitely *could* be used as a weapon. Stan had semi-threatened Craig with a biology textbook. Automatically, Stan stepped back, trying to avoid being hit with anything.

“Whoa, I was just coming over to check in,” he defended, holding his hands up to show his innocence. Bebe didn’t look convinced.

“Nice try, bucko,” she told him, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She leaned close, daunting. Instead of backing away, though, Stan stood his ground. “You’re not getting anywhere near Wendy, you cheater.”

The insult didn’t bother him as much as he thought it would. He wondered why that might be, and decided it was probably because he knew it was true. He wasn’t defensive about it; he still felt bad, of course, and he regretted it, but he had come to terms with the fact that he’d fucked up. He couldn’t undo it, but... he could try to fix it, maybe? He looked at Wendy, trying to comprehend what she might be feeling. Her expression was purely agitated, though there was something else there that Stan couldn’t place.

“Stop looking at her like that,” Bebe hissed.

“Bebe — ” Wendy began, but Bebe refused to listen.

“You can’t have her back! She doesn’t want you anymore.” Bebe shifted her books into one arm, and reached forward to jab a finger accusingly into Stan’s chest. It kind of hurt, having a nail bite into his shirt. Stan nudged Bebe’s hand away.

“I don’t want her back,” Stan said. As soon as he said that, Bebe’s eyes lit aflame.

“You don’t want her back!” she said, apparently angry at the revelation. She was back to jabbing her finger into his chest. “Why not, asshole? Are you too high and mighty for her? Well, I have *news for you*, Stan — !”

“That’s not it,” Stan interrupted.

Bebe looked thoroughly offended. “That’s not it? Then what!”

“I’m gay.”

Yep.

He just...

He just said that.

Bebe floundered, her mouth still agape, but her eyes no longer holding anger. Stan fought the urge to backtrack and say *I'm joking, haha, I'm not gay*, because that would be a straight-up lie. Or... maybe only half of a lie. He was kind of confused.

Oh well.

No going back now.

"Oh," Bebe finally said. She withdrew from him, and stood up straight. She seemed to be willing to drop it for now, though Stan had a feeling that mostly had to do with the fact that she was shocked. He wasn't off the hook, and that much was obvious as soon as Bebe recovered. She went right back to glaring at him, though she didn't poke him anymore. "That's not an excuse!"

"I never said it was an excuse," Stan replied. "I'm just saying that's why I don't want her back. I'm, like, gay."

"*I'm like gay*," Bebe parroted his words, shaking her head in disapproval. "I can't believe you, Stan, playing with Wendy like this for so long. When did you figure this out, huh? Before or after you fucked Red behind her back?"

Red? Did she just say *Red*? Stan looked at Wendy, totally caught of guard, but Wendy looked equally as perplexed. Stan turned back to Bebe. "Um, did you just say Red?"

"Duh! Who else would you have screwed?"

"I didn't do anything with Red," he said.

"Oh, really? You're telling me Wendy lied?"

At that, Stan looked at Wendy again. None of this was making any sense to him. He was torn between saying what really happened, and just leaving it. Stan was about ready to drop this conversation. At the same time, he wasn't exactly thrilled with the lie of him and Red sleeping together going around. Another thing he didn't want to do, though, was out Kyle. Stan, conflicted, pinched the bridge of his nose with his forefinger and thumb. "I didn't do anything with Red," Stan repeated.

"Bebe, I never said he did anything with Red," he heard Wendy say. When Stan finally looked up again, Bebe and Wendy had turned to each other and begun talking.

"You didn't?" asked Bebe. "Where did I get Red from, then?"

"I don't know," Wendy replied. She combed her fingers through her hair, which she'd pulled into a ponytail at some point. "I didn't say who, it's not my place to do that."

“Not your — ” and then, Bebe gasped. She spun on her heel, her attention on Stan again. “You cheated on her *with a boy*?”

Suddenly very conscious of where they were, Stan glanced around the hallways. No one seemed to be paying attention, thankfully. That must have displayed his guilt, however, because Bebe gasped again — louder.

“Oh my god, you *asshole*!”

“Bebe, can I please just talk to Wendy for a second?” Stan asked. Bebe jutted out her lower lip, obviously not pleased with that prospect.

“I’m not leaving you alone with her!” she argued.

Oh, Jesus. “Please?”

“Girl code,” was all Bebe said. Stan waited for someone to move, but no one did. Bebe remained planted where she stood, and Wendy was looking at Stan expectantly, her arms crossed over her chest. Stan sighed. Okay. He could do this with Bebe as an audience. He’d done worse with worse audiences. He turned to Wendy, fidgeting with the strap of his backpack.

“I just wanted to apologize,” Stan said. Wendy, although her expression still held firm, seemed to relax a little. More encouraged, he continued. “For everything that I put you through, I mean. I know it must have really hurt, and I’m... really sorry.”

Wendy frowned, but slowly loosened the cross of her arms.

“Can we still be friends?” asked Stan. He was fully prepared to be rejected immediately, but no such reaction came from anyone involved. In the quiet, he felt more than pressured to explain himself. “I understand if you don’t want to be friends, of course, but I still really care about you, Wendy, and I don’t want to lose you. You’re still really important to me.”

A moment passed, where everyone remained completely still and silent. Stan could feel himself getting nervous. It wouldn’t be the end of the world if she rejected him, this time. Things would be okay. He knew it.

Finally, Wendy moved. She released the tension in her body through a sigh, and dropped her arms by her sides.

“Yeah, we can still be friends,” she said. Relief flooded through Stan.

“Thank you,” he said. Wendy rolled her eyes, though it was playful, and not exasperated.

The bell rang before Wendy could speak, which everyone took as a sign to leave it simple. Instead of speaking, Wendy approached and wrapped him in a hug. Stan returned it. The sentiment was sweet, but the action itself was awkward and a little too gentle to be totally casual. “I love you,” Wendy said to him, and Stan knew it was platonic.

“I love you, too,” he replied. Wendy didn’t pull away from him, even when everyone else in the hallway started to rush towards their classes before the final bell sounded. Stan tightened his grip on Wendy, and surprisingly enough, Wendy hugged him back tighter, as well.

Wendy muttered, “I’m gonna miss you.”

Another thought, and Stan responded, “me too.”

Chapter End Notes

next update on wednesday, december 26th!

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Perspicacious Eyes

Chapter Summary

They just understood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Apparently, there was a downside to taking pretty much everything out of his backpack—he didn't have a calculator.

Which would be fine in the classes where math wasn't the main focus, of course; and since he didn't plan on focusing on math in the future, he wasn't taking very many classes that had to do with math. There was one class, however, that was mandatory, and that class was algebra-adjacent. It had some weird name in his schedule that he'd never bothered to memorize. He found it kind of odd how much the high school focused on giving the classes weird names. Most of the mathematics class names were acronyms that only people in the classes themselves would ever consider relevant. There were plenty of people in those very same classes that truly didn't give a damn, though. Surprise, surprise: Stan was one of them.

Stan stared down at his empty worksheet with a lost expression, trying to think himself out of this one. Maybe he could do it all by hand? No, that was an awful idea. He wouldn't be able to finish the worksheet if he did all the math by hand, and even *then* he would have some things in the problems that the teacher hadn't taught the class how to do without a calculator. (More accurately, he hadn't been paying attention when she taught them how, so this was all pretty much his fault.) If he tried to do it all by hand, then he'd just have that much more to do when he got home that night. Another thought came to him. He buried his head in his arms on his desk. The teacher didn't have any spare calculators, either—no graphing calculators, at least. Just the very, very tiny elementary ones that were capable of basic arithmetic. At that point, he might as well just do it the old fashioned way.

After wallowing in his brain for a moment too long, Stan lifted his head from his desk and peered around the room for someone he could casually ask for assistance. He didn't really know many of the kids in most of his classes. He'd been significantly more popular when he was still on the football team, but there was so much bullshit going on in his head back then that he hadn't branched out and made any friends outside of the social butterflies that occasionally hung around their lunch tables. Even calling *them* friends would be a stretch.

Kyle was three courses ahead in math, so Stan couldn't hope to find him for help during class. Kenny was in the math class right next to his own at that very moment, but he couldn't just leave the room to ask him for a calculator. That would be a fast-track to the dean, and he did *not* want to go to the dean. Eric was off the table, because fuck Eric, and Butters was in

the same class as Kyle (which caught everyone off-guard). Kevin Stoley was over in the corner, but Stan had never really spoken to him before, plus he was dating Red, and he didn't know if Bebe's rumor had spread. Either way, he didn't want to test it. In a last ditch effort, Stan scanned the room for Craig, because they kind of seemed to be befriending each other at that point, and Stan was honestly beginning to not hate the guy...

Tweek.

Stan felt like kind of an idiot for not noticing the person in the desk a row up and to his left. Tweek practically shivered in his chair, his pencil *taptaptaptap*-ing against a button on his graphing calculator. Perfect. He just had to...

Stan glanced towards the teacher, whom was at the opposite end of the room helping a different student figure out how to factor with perfect squares, or some shit. With the seat immediately to Tweek's right being open, Stan waited for the right opportunity before he quickly gathered his things, walked up, and sat next to him. Still quivering, Tweek flinched, scooting as far away from Stan as possible without falling out of the chair. Stan could understand why. The desks were pushed up right next to each other, and he had sat down in kind of a hurry. He would probably flinch— and, well, Tweek was Tweek.

"This isn't your seat!" Tweek yelped quietly, smacking his hand down on the desk surface in front of Stan. His fingers grazed Stan's notebook, and he quickly recoiled, turning. Stan didn't know what was up with him, but he wasn't acting abnormal, so he figured it was just him being a stickler for the rules. Stan remained where he was, though he didn't settle further.

"I forgot my calculator at home," Stan said, "so, since you're the only guy I know in this class, I wanted to ask if I could borrow yours?"

Tweek stared at him, obviously conflicted.

"You can say no, if you want," added Stan. "It's your calculator. I'm not gonna, like, take it or force you to let me use it, or whatever."

Tweek's hand darted out to grab the calculator in question. The screen was full of the same number, over and over and over again, without a rhyme or reason. That must have been the number Tweek had been hitting with his pencil. Seven. "You can use it," began Tweek, hitting the clear button twice. Stan opened his mouth to thank him, but he didn't get that far before Tweek spoke again. "But you can only use it if you help me figure this shit out."

Blinking, Stan thought that over. Did he understand this stuff enough to teach it? He understood the basics, and he got all of the questions right on the practice test, so... he might as well try, right? "Okay," Stan agreed. He saw the way Tweek immediately relaxed, his hands no longer shaking as he held the calculator. His grip on it loosened, too, and he set the calculator down on the desk space between the two of them, so they could both use it when needed. Stan shifted, picking up his pencil and turning more fully to Tweek. "So, what do you need help with?"

"All of it," Tweek blurted. He worried his lip between his teeth. The skin pulled taut, and a bit of blood bubbled up from a previous cut he'd attained from his own mouth. It reminded

Stan of being punched in the mouth, which reminded him of Kyle. It was an interesting progression of thought. Tweek glanced over at him, accidentally unscrewing the front of his mechanical pencil. He struggled to fix it as he tried to elaborate. “I don’t understand numbers, man, they confuse the shit out of me— I hate them! Ergh... but that’s not the point, I just need you to tell me where the vertex is and how to find it, and... the x intercept, and the range, and...”

“So, everything,” Stan replied. Tweek nodded vigorously. Okay. Everything. He could do this. He could help Tweek with math. This was something he was equipped to do. He took a moment to think before examining the first problem on the worksheet. “Okay, so I’m gonna be totally up-front in saying I was absent the day we learned how to do this— ”

Tweek yelped. Stan scrambled to continue.

“Wait— you didn’t let me finish. I wasn’t here the day we learned it, so my way of doing it is different than the teacher wants us to do it, but you get the same answer either way.” Stan heaved the rest of his explanation as quickly as possible, and when he was done, Tweek gave him a look of freaked out understanding. Stan knew that the freaked-out part of the equation was probably just Tweek’s face, though, so he ignored it. He moved onto the problem instead of explaining himself further, because he had a feeling Tweek got the gist. “I use the calculator for all of it.”

“But you’re only supposed to use it *after* you do the problem,” Tweek said.

“Yeah, but she doesn’t need to know that,” Stan said. “She won’t know the difference. It’s basically, like... acting.”

Tweek narrowed his eyes and said, very blatantly, “fuck you.”

Stan took it in stride and moved on. He turned on the calculator, which had darkened to save battery automatically, and narrated what he did as he did it, so Tweek could follow. “First we gotta put it into the calculator, but we can’t just enter it normally, so we gotta hit the *y equals* button. That’ll bring up a list, and you can basically just type in the problem there.”

Stan typed in the equation.

“Then you hit graph.” Stan hit the graph button. “And then you gotta check out where the very top— or bottom, in this case— of the parabola is, and you write that down for the vertex.”

Stan jotted down the vertex answer on his own worksheet.

“The axis of symmetry is just the x point of the vertex,” Stan explained. “And the y-intercept is where the parabola meets it exactly. See here, it hits the line at negative three— ”

Stan pointed to the screen’s tiny y-intercept. Tweek leaned in to see better. When he appeared satisfied, Stan moved on.

“The domain is always all real numbers, so there’s no calculation needed there. The range and the minimum is the y point of the vertex.” With that, Stan’s explanation of the math problem was complete, and he leaned comfortably in his chair. As an afterthought, he wrote down all of the answers he’d gone over with Tweek, and quickly drew the graph down in the blank space next to the equation. “And that’s how you do it. Did that help?”

When Stan looked at Tweek, he saw that there was a distinct expression on his face. Tweek’s eyes were absolutely lost as he stared at the graph on the calculator. He looked totally confused, and that didn’t bode well with Stan. He thought he’d explained it pretty well, but maybe that was just bias. “What,” Tweek finally muttered. His cheeks had gone red, like he was flushed from the effort of trying to sort through all of the information. Maybe... Stan had gone a little fast.

Okay.

Take two.

“Did you get anything from that?” Stan asked. Tweek furrowed his brows and bit more sharply into the skin of his lip. More blood came to the surface, and he must have noticed, because he quickly wiped his mouth with his sleeve. He made a sharp noise when he saw the blood.

“Jesus—!” but then he cut off, and stopped biting his lip. He pressed his hand over the small tear in the skin, choosing instead to bite his nail. “I mean, I got the part with the parabola at the y-intercept, but... *agh*— other than that, no.”

Stan’s lungs squeezed. Christ, he was really shit at teaching, wasn’t he? How did Kyle tutor people? How had Kyle tutored *him*? Maybe he needed a different approach. Stan hummed under his breath, trying to figure out how to get the information across differently. How had he done it? He told Tweek how to do it. It felt simple to him, of course, but that was because he understood the way his own brain worked. He needed to step into how *Tweek’s* brain might work.

The fact that Tweek latched onto one thing of Stan’s instruction gave Stan a tiny *aha!* moment.

“Do you like books?” Stan asked. Tweek turned and looked at Stan like he’d gone mad.

“What?”

“Do you like books?” Stan repeated.

Still appearing skeptical, Tweek nodded. “Yeah... why?”

“Just give me a sec,” was all Stan replied with. He pulled out his notebook—the only thing he’d brought with him that morning, other than his pencil—and flipped to a blank page. He quickly wrote down the steps he’d just gone over, and when he had a complete list, he tore the page out and slid it over to Tweek. Although still very obviously perplexed, Tweek picked

up the page of instructions and read it over. “You seem to be more of a visual person, so maybe written instruction will help— ”

Tweek interrupted with a soft, “oh!” and set the piece of paper down on the desk next to his work sheet. He didn’t really seem receptive to what Stan was saying, and for a minute, Stan wondered if Tweek had been listening *at all*. He had a feeling Tweek might be inadvertently really good at ignoring people when they spoke. His original suspicions of Tweek’s learning style were confirmed quickly, as Tweek properly finished the second problem on the worksheet with very little reference back to the list of instructions. Stan smiled, just a little.

“That help?” he asked. Tweek nodded.

“Yeah, Jesus, dude, it makes sense,” answered Tweek. He took in a deep breath, and relaxed a little, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. Stan took the time to glance over the still-visible graph on the calculator’s screen, and jotted down some of the answers for his own problem. “Thanks.”

Stan looked up. The corners of Tweek’s mouth twitched in a tiny smile, though it was the kind of smile that told Stan he was just doing it to be polite. It was gone almost as soon as it came, and before long, he was hunched back over his worksheet. Stan nodded, more to himself than anything, since Tweek wasn’t looking at him anymore. “Yeah, man, no problem.”

They finished the worksheet together. It took them a little under twenty minutes, and from there, they had about ten left to spare. Stan felt pretty lucky that today was just a workday. He contemplated doing some extra work on the side, but decided it wasn’t worth it. He didn’t have enough time to finish anything, anyway, and he would rather sit down and do something when he knew he had the time to complete it. The two of them sat quietly, for a minute or two, before Stan decided it wouldn’t hurt to do some socializing.

“Congratulations on the picket fence score,” Stan said, trying to break the ice in a simple way. Tweek’s expression morphed into one of paranoia, and he looked frantically around the room like he’d find something out of place.

“How’d you know about that?” Tweek asked, picking up his calculator. He fidgeted with it, pressing numbers only to clear the screen without doing anything with them. His leg began to bounce, which shook both his desk and the one Stan sat in. It was slightly annoying, but Stan could deal with it.

For a minute, Stan wondered if he should be honest in saying who he’d gotten the information from. Would he be stepping somewhere he didn’t want to? Would Tweek get mad at Craig for talking about him? There was no way to tell, but Stan... was done lying. Even though he was nervous, he couldn’t bring himself to even fib. “Craig,” he finally answered. Tweek snapped up.

“Craig?” he muttered, eyes searching in minuscule ways. “When did you... wait, did you —?”

“Yeah.”

Neither elaborated. There was no need.

They just understood.

“Please,” Tweek suddenly said, picking at the tiny, rust-colored stain on his sleeve. Even as he spoke, his voice was extremely quiet, and his tone was subdued in a dangerous way.

“*Please* be careful with it— *ngh*— Craig can get a little neurotic, and...”

Tweek trailed off, and Stan found himself momentarily alone with his thoughts. Craig? Neurotic? He had a bit of an issue believing that, but at the same time... it made total sense.

“Remember in the alcove?” Tweek practically whispered. Stan leaned in to hear him better, but quickly leaned away when Tweek seemed to be freaked out by that. He turned to watch the way his mouth moved instead. It was easier to watch, than actively worry about hearing the words perfectly. Stan nodded for Tweek to continue. “When Craig said something about me having a bad experience? I did, and— *agh*— I mean, obviously, I did, but— Jesus, man... Craig was fucked up about it for weeks, a lot longer than *I* was, like, physically speaking—and he— fuck, man, he thought it was his fault.”

Stan frowned, his brows furrowing.

“He wouldn’t even let me touch the tame stuff, after that, it— *urgh*— took forever to convince him I wasn’t gonna break.” Tweek rubbed at his arms, and suddenly Stan was reminded of Pandora. He contemplated asking about her, but he decided that wouldn’t be a very logical leap in conversational topics. Instead, he just tried to ignore it.

“Don’t worry,” Stan replied, after they’d both fallen quiet. Tweek looked at him. “I’ll be careful.”

Another thought.

Tweek gave Stan a look, like he knew something was up, but he didn’t say anything about it. Or, more accurately, he didn’t get the chance to. The bell for end of class rang loudly, and made the both of them flinch in surprise. Tweek went the extra mile and unintentionally hollered, shoving his things into his backpack. Stan followed his lead, quickly flipping his notebook shut and pushing the three total items into the largest pocket. Whether it was intentional or not, neither knew, but either way, they ended up lingering a moment after everyone else had left. Perhaps it was the silence, the final quiet that settled in the room, or maybe it was just to keep out of the way of the stampede of everyone else.

Stan and Tweek, without prior agreement, exited the class together like old friends.

“So, tell me about your speech,” Stan said as they made their way down the hallway. It was difficult to navigate between the crowds of people and also keep up with one another, but they managed in their own way. Out of the corner of his eye, Stan saw Tweek tic. He payed it no mind.

“My speech?” Tweek grunted, folding his hands together anxiously. “What about it?”

“Y’know, like, what was it about? What topic did you cover?”

There was a stillness that followed Stan’s words, like Tweek didn’t really want to share. Stan found that curious, but he decided not to push it. He simply left the question in the air, allowing Tweek the freedom to answer or not answer. As they descended the stairs, Tweek finally blurted, “addiction.”

Just one word held too much power.

Stan’s shoe fell short on the next step, coming into contact with the corner of the surface. He gripped the rail tightly, barely managing to catch himself before he collapsed down the rest of the staircase. A few students cursed at his sudden inconvenience, but the rest of them moved around him. Tweek stilled, automatically reaching out to help steady him again. “Are you okay?” Tweek asked, sticking close as Stan kept walking. They finally stopped near the main locker bay, finding it a good place to catch their breath. Again, Tweek repeated, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Stan answered.

“What happened?” More questions. “I didn’t say anything wrong, did I?”

“No,” replied Stan. He smiled a little at Tweek, but Tweek didn’t return the smile at all. He simply furrowed his brows. Stan’s expression left. “I just fell, is all, I’m pretty clumsy.”

“No, you’re not,” Tweek said. Startled at the sudden firmness of his tone, Stan found himself looking on in confusion. There was a steadiness that Tweek held, even in the midst of something so mundane. “You’re one of the best athletes in the school, I— I’m not about to get into that can of worms, but you’re not clumsy.”

The intensity in Tweek’s eyes became too much, and Stan had to look away. Tweek caught onto it.

“Something’s on your mind,” Tweek noted aloud. Stan closed his eyes to reorient his brain. When he opened them again, Tweek was no longer looking at him. He was still speaking, though. “It’s fine, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I’d just like it if you could stop lying. Remember what I said about Shakespeare?”

Stan sighed. “Yeah, I got it. Thematic deception.”

Tweek gave him a sideways look. He’d found a comfort zone, in the way he held himself with renewed confidence. He’d fallen calm, like in the hallway during their Shakespeare talk, or behind the school in the alcove. “You look different, man.”

“What?” asked Stan.

“Your clothes,” clarified Tweek. He jolted in a soft nod of a gesture towards Stan’s outfit. “You look different.”

Stan didn’t understand why people kept getting thrown off by his clothing. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” Tweek answered. “It’s just different.”

The second bell rang. There were still four minutes left in passing time, but people took the gist to bolt to class early. A crowd of students blocking most of the locker bay dispersed, and with the view now clear, Stan found himself gazing at a scene he never imagined he’d ever witness.

Originally, it was fairly mundane, but the deeper he looked, the closer he noticed the things that burned from observational corners. He saw Kyle’s hat, first and foremost, barely standing out among the green lockers. His coat was more blaring. He was digging for something in his locker. All of that was normal. It wasn’t Kyle that Stan found odd.

It was Eric.

He hung around the side of Kyle’s locker, leaning his forearm against the adjacent door. He’d leaned down, hovering over Kyle’s shoulder. His mouth was obviously close enough for Kyle to feel his breath, and that alone was enough to make Stan feel disgusted. At first, that was all that it was. Kyle, scuffling through his locker, and Eric, leaning over his shoulder to watch.

Then the hand dipped, and Eric was suddenly grabbing a handful of Kyle’s rear. There was no drastic movement— nothing that Stan had been expecting, at least. Kyle didn’t hit Eric away, or turn and yell at him. Instead, Kyle’s entire body tensed. He shied away, pressing himself ever-so-faintly closer to his locker. The motion was tiny, and barely noticeable, but Stan saw it.

“Dude,” Stan muttered, still shocked at what he was watching. With the shivering coming from Tweek, Stan knew he had seen the exact same thing Stan had. A landslide of protective feelings coursed through Stan’s veins. Tweek grabbed Stan’s sleeve— only then did he feel just the gravity of Tweek’s shuddering. Stan looked over, almost startled by the sudden change in his body language.

“Go— ” Tweek muttered, his voice cracking on the word. He cleared his throat, and thrust his palm against Stan’s arm. “Go— that’s not, it’s— go break— go break them up, that’s not— please, I can’t— just— ”

Tweek swallowed harshly, his eyes closing with the effort. He drew a breath in through his nose and shoved Stan’s arm again, ushering him forward. He said something else, but it was too quiet for Stan to hear. Before he could ask, Tweek had fled.

Stan didn’t question it.

He adjusted his backpack and tried his best not to storm over to the two in anger. He needed to hold himself back. He needed to act calmly, and rationally, and not make this situation— whatever the situation even *was*— worse. He struggled to come up with an excuse to interrupt on the fly, and for the life of him, he couldn’t. *Just think*, said his brain. *C’mon, just think*.

Stan patted Eric’s shoulder, and perhaps his gesture was too sharp, because Eric spun around like he’d been slapped. At least he let go of Kyle.

“Dude, the fuck?” spoke Eric, glaring at Stan.

Calmly, Stan said, “Butters is looking for you, dude.”

Eric’s glare hardened. “Stan, I don’t give a shit about Butters.”

“That’s not what Butters is saying,” said Stan.

“Not what— ” Eric cut off, rubbing the heel of his palm against his eye. He appeared thoroughly exasperated. “For fuck’s sake, I’m gonna kill him. Hold on, Kyle, I’ll be back.”

Kyle didn’t respond to the pat Eric gave his shoulder, but Eric didn’t seem too put-off by that. He simply shrugged and left, walking down the halls with his hands shoved into his pockets.

Stan would have to apologize to Butters later.

For now, he was more concerned with Kyle.

Stan stepped only slightly closer, taking up the space Eric had previously been standing in. Kyle kept digging through his locker, and he didn’t look up at Stan. With a frown, Stan reached forward. He stopped short, however, and dropped his hand. Kyle probably wouldn’t be too keen on being touched, right? “Hey,” he said quietly, trying to tilt his head in such a way as to capture Kyle’s gaze. Kyle refused to meet the gaze. Stan furrowed his brows. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” replied Kyle stiffly.

“I saw Eric...” Stan trailed off, unwilling to say it. “...um, what’s going on?”

“Please leave me alone.”

Something hurtled through Stan’s chest. Something much too reminiscent of a time too recent. Stan stood up a little straighter, more perceptive on what was going on. “Are you... sure?”

“Yes, leave me alone,” said Kyle. He slammed his locker shut, turned to leave, and in a moment of desperation, Stan moved to block his path. Kyle ran into him, but kept his gaze turned as far down as possible. Without thinking, Stan reached out to lift Kyle’s chin and make him look up. Immediately, Kyle revolted, jerking his head and smacking Stan’s hand away. Stan got the message loud and clear.

“Kyle— ”

“Please, I can’t look at you,” Kyle said, his tone firm. “Please, just— I can’t look at you. I *can’t*.”

Stan opened his mouth to ask, but he didn’t get the chance. Kyle pushed past him and walked quickly down the hallway, towards his next class. The rest of the locker bay emptied and stilled. Stan lingered until the final bell rang.

Chapter End Notes

here's an early update for y'all. :) merry christmas, everyone.
daily updates from now on.

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Good Sport

Chapter Summary

Stan began to run.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Mr. Garret!”

Mr. Garret came to a stop and turned to look at Stan as he approached. A student he’d been helping just a few seconds ago, seemingly satisfied, dug a basketball out of the bin and threw it across the gym to their friend. They ran off to chase it. The rest of the class ignored Stan, even as he had to dodge and avoid some kid running backwards at full speed to catch a racket they’d accidentally let go of mid-swing. Stan leaned against the wall a few feet away from Mr. Garret, deciding that was the best course of action to stay out of everyone else’s way.

“Mr. Garret,” Stan said again, just to be sure he still had the PE teacher’s attention. Sure enough, he did, and he began to talk relatively quickly after that. “Could I talk to you for a second?”

Mr. Garret’s mustache twitched as his expression narrowed. Curious, he replied, “sure, Stan, what about?”

“Just some stuff.” Stan glanced around the gym for a second, examining just how much privacy they would have if they spoke here. Upon finding that they wouldn’t have very much, he decided it might be best to go the extra mile. He straightened up, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder in gesture towards the exit. “Would you mind if we spoke somewhere a little more private?”

The gym teacher looked towards the door after the gesture. He seemed to understand, though he obviously didn’t know what this would be about. He also appeared a little reluctant, and Stan could fully understand why. Kids typically didn’t ask to talk to their teachers alone unless some shady shit was about to go down. Stan wasn’t planning on any shady shit, though, and Mr. Garret must have seen that. He turned away at first, which concerned Stan for a second, before he realized that he was just letting the student aides know he would be stepping out for a few minutes.

They were just finishing up some proficiencies, so Mr. Garret didn’t really need to be in the gym for that, anyway. It was mostly self-guided by the students.

Mr. Garret made his way towards the door, and waved Stan over to follow him. Stan did without saying anything. In a matter of seconds, they had stepped down the hallway and into

one of the other rooms that doubled as a secondary nurses office. Inside of that office were two smaller side-rooms, but those were locked. They left the door to the hallway open, and even though Stan felt a little out in the open about that, he understood there was no way to get *total* privacy in a school.

Mr. Garret pulled two chairs down from an extra stack in the corner, and set them facing each other. Honestly, Stan found himself almost surprised at that. He would have expected him to be more interested in standing rather than sitting, what with the fact that he was a health and fitness teacher and all. Mr. Garret must assume this called for them to sit down, though, and Stan decided not to question it.

They sat there, staring at one another, for a few seconds. Mr. Garret's attendance and grade clipboard rested on his knee, and Stan felt a little bare without something to keep his hands busy. He leaned down and pulled up his left sock, adjusting it under the school-issued gym outfit. "Is something going on?" Mr. Garret asked. Stan shook his head.

"No," he replied. "Not really, nothing, like, super important, I just wanted to..."

God, how should he word this? Stan swallowed, resting his hands against his knees casually. Mr. Garret noticed, and he quirked a brow at Stan's mannerisms. Stan decided to just come out with it.

"I was wondering if I could— like, rejoin the football team?"

Mr. Garret's expression shifted just the slightest, with both brows raised and eyes slightly widened. He rubbed his chin the way men with beards do, and let a pause linger before he said anything. "You want to rejoin the football team," he said. When Stan nodded, he sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. "That's why you wanted privacy. Because of what this conversation might lead to talking about."

Another nod. A few seconds later, a frown appeared on Mr. Garret's face.

"Why do you want to rejoin?"

"I'm..." not a moment in, and Stan had already started to second-guess his decision. Was he really prepared to do this? Was he really prepared to jump right back in? He wanted to rejoin, though. He missed *doing* things. "I miss it. Like, a lot."

Mr. Garret said nothing. He simply stared, a bit of a disbelieving look on his face. Stan could understand why. In a bit of a subdued way, Stan decided to just say fuck it. Be as honest as possible, right? Honesty is the best policy?

"I know one of the members transferred to North," he muttered, scratching at his wrist, "and... I'm clean, so..."

Mr. Garret released a small grunt. "You're clean?"

"I'm clean," Stan confirmed. He nodded with his words, as if that would help the believability of it. *He* knew it was true, but Mr. Garret didn't. He hadn't said more than a

word to him since he was kicked off for failing a urine test.

“How long?” asked Mr. Garret.

“A little over a week,” answered Stan. Another disbelieving look crossed Mr. Garret’s expression, and Stan understood why. “I know, I know, it doesn’t sound like much, but— I’m serious. I’m never touching that stuff again. Never. I got rid of it all.”

The loud clatter of a basketball ramming against a metal door exploded through the downstairs gym, and some kids yelled about the noise. It was a distant thing, however, and Stan didn’t pay it any mind. Neither did Mr. Garret.

Something in the room shifted. Mr. Garret shifted with it, sitting forward a little more. His disbelieving expression faded, and it was replaced with one of empathy. Stan knew that look. He wished he didn’t, but he did.

“Stan,” Mr. Garret began, in that tone that adults use with teenagers when they want to let them down slowly. Stan forced himself not to wince. “You’re a good kid. Really, you are—and you were one of our best players. You have a knack for teamwork, and you’re good with people, and I’d like nothing more than to take you at your word and let you come back.”

But...

“But you have to understand where I’m at right now,” he finished, adjusting the clipboard on his knee. Stan glanced down at the floor, scuffing his shoe against the tile. “We’ve given you as many chances as we can, and you didn’t meet our expectations back then. Because of that, I don’t think we can take you back. Not this year.”

Stan couldn’t help but feel disappointed. He’d thought this might be his chance at redemption. Maybe he could rekindle something, or find a new place where he belonged, but something just didn’t fit with that. Stan knew what that meant, even if his body didn’t want to accept it. He scratched his elbow, though it was more of a nervous tic rather than a genuine itch.

“Do you understand?” Mr. Garret asked. Stan must have looked pretty bummed out, because Mr. Garret’s tone had dropped into something a lot more understanding and soft. Stan didn’t know why he was even asking that question, at that point, but he could handle it.

“Yeah, I understand,” Stan replied. And he did. He really did. He just... kind of wished he didn’t, if that made sense. He decided it would be a good time to cut the conversation in its tracks. Stan stood. “Yeah, no, I get it, it’s fine. Just thought I’d ask, y’know?”

He turned his head back up to Mr. Garret, a smile on his face even though he was still fighting something doubtful. The expression came a lot easier than it would have last week, though, and Stan considered that a step in the right direction. Mr. Garret smiled back.

“There’s always next year, Stan,” he said, standing up himself. He picked up his chair and placed it back onto the stack. Stan followed in the same action with his own chair. “I’m not guaranteeing anything, but if you can keep yourself together until September, I don’t see why you won’t be able to come back.”

“Yeah, I’ll see about next year,” Stan said.

“That’s the spirit,” Mr. Garret stated, his tone lighthearted. Stan had a hard time figuring out where exactly Mr. Garret stood on the whole issue, but he didn’t feel stable enough to really have a conversation about it. He had been kicked off, and he remembered that day distinctly. The disappointment on everyone’s faces would have shattered him, if he weren’t too stoned to give a damn.

Yeah, that... had been a bad year.

They made their way back into the gym, where students were still going about their business without knowing what was going on around them. The people with the basketball were still hopping around like rabbits on methamphetamine, trying to keep their heart rate up high enough to get the twenty minutes necessary before the bell rang. The screen up on one of the walls displayed a list of everyone’s progress. Stan had already completed his. He would just need to hang around until class ended.

As soon as he found an unpopulated corner to stand in, something newly familiar began to sink from his chest into his shoes. He knew the feeling better than he would have liked, and at first, he tried to will it away. Stan told himself he didn’t recognize it. It wasn’t the *it*. Because, as far as he was concerned, he was done with *it*. Of course, willing it away didn’t work. He would need a distraction.

Hanging out around the outer edge of the gym, Stan stretched his arms and legs and examined the area. Students he recognized, and some he didn’t, mostly stuck to the middle, where the basketball hoops hung from the ceiling. He would join, but he didn’t really feel like tossing a ball around for fifteen minutes with some dudes he’d never spoken to before. Some of the girls were playing volleyball, but that was even less appealing.

He needed to keep himself occupied. He needed to busy his brain. He needed to get his heart rate up. He needed blood pumping, and what better way to do that than to run?

Stan adjusted, brushing his palms against the sides of his gym pants. He pictured being outside, running drills and doing those dumb exercises that he honestly fucking missed more than he thought he could miss *anything*. If he focused, he could see it so vividly. The synthetic grass of the field, the spray-painted lime green, white, and yellow— the track, the goal, the scoreboard, the stands.

He was there, in the field, feeling the cold winter air breeze through him. Then, he decided he didn’t want it to be winter in his imagination, and he made it warm. Spring, with no snow and growing grass and the smell of distant rain. He was there. He was outdoors, he was on the track, he was home.

Stan began to run.

Not a slow run, either. He ran fast— as fast as his legs would let him go without losing control. He stuck to the wall of the gym, but imagined the wall was the edge of the track. He dodged people who would occasionally stumble into his way, and imagined they were just obstacles like sticks and rocks. Simple. He needed simple. He loved it.

In freshman year, when Stan was still struggling to orient himself in the different environment, he would come down to the track every day after school. His nerves would get his blood pumping, and that would give him the energy to sprint. He never went for more than ten minutes, but it was enough to get the pent-up energy he'd collected through the day *out*.

Stan finished his first lap around the gym, but it wasn't enough. His legs were starting to buzz, but it wasn't enough. He didn't feel it. He needed to feel alive. Just today. Just for a few minutes.

On his fourth lap, his chest started to feel tight. He pushed through it, because he knew that wasn't asthma. That was his heart. It beat so powerfully in his chest, it throbbed in his ribs, it made him ache, but it made him *feel*.

Kyle had accompanied him to the field, once. They hadn't planned it, it just happened. Stan lead him there unintentionally, and Kyle hadn't asked any questions. They both stripped off their jackets and tore off their hats and said *fuck it*. The day was beautiful, their winter-wear was just habit, and running had never seemed so magnificent.

Stan still remembered the way their shoes collided on the track. He still remembered the way it felt to race Kyle around the oval of grass. When it got too hot to keep running with their shirts, they took them off and threw them aside and kept running. Kyle was used to continued speeds, and he could maintain a steady-paced run longer. Stan was used to sprints, but he had a bad habit of expending all of his energy in one burst. Kyle taunted him about being a slow-poke when he beat Stan. To be polite, Stan had jabbed him in the shoulder.

Lap six.

They lingered in the field ten minutes after that, staring up at the sky on their backs as the clouds rolled over their heads. The sun beat down on their skin, and gave Kyle's shoulders a nasty sunburn that forced him to go with tank tops for the rest of the week. Even after their ordeal, they didn't understand why they decided it was a good idea to lay shirtless in the sun. They weren't paranoid about getting caught out without their shirts by people, since the field was a solid quarter mile down from the school, but the sun followed them everywhere.

Kyle blamed Stan for his sunburn.

Why isn't Kyle talking to me? What did I do wrong this time?

Snap.

Stan drew in a sharp breath, coming to on the floor of the gym. The fluorescent lights above him glared into his eyes, forcing him to squint the awful patterns away. His lungs drew in shuddering gasps as he searched for air. His shoulder blades dug into the lacquered wood flooring beneath him. It stung his bones. It took a while for him to process any of the objects around him, but when he finally did, he saw something distinct and familiar lingering over him like some sort of shadow angel.

They stood above him, their feet on either side of his waist, staring down at his face. Their hair came into process first, and the blond immediately made Stan think of Kenny. His vision attuned colors again, and when they finally did, he saw the distinct face of Butters staring down at him.

“—dy? Hey!” Butters exclaimed, a wide smile on his lips. “Glad ya finally woke up... ya had me worried there for a sec!”

Stan slowly pushed himself up, and when he did, Butters backed away until he no longer stood immediately over him. Confused, Stan gazed around the gym. The entire area was empty, and the screen had been cleared of the class’ scores. He combed his fingers through his hair. “What happened?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but you looked awful comfy down there,” said Butters. He offered a hand for Stan to take, and even though Stan never considered himself very comfortable around Butters as a friend, he decided to take the help in standing. Butters hoisted him up with little difficulty. Stan thanked him. “No problem, buddy! Anything else I can help you with?”

Stan still couldn’t figure out what the fuck had happened. He remembered running, and then... waking up. Had he passed out? Did he push himself too far? It obviously must not have been very dramatic, because no one felt it necessary to check on him. Unless he’d kept running *after* everyone had left? Goddammit, why didn’t he *remember*?

“Stan? Hey, Earth to Stan?”

Stan looked over. “What?”

“Nothin’, I just wanted to make sure you didn’t faint again.”

Stan snorted, rubbing at the side of his head with his palm. The disorientation that came from waking in an unfamiliar situation was slowly starting to fade, and his brain was beginning to work again. He vaguely remembered saying something to someone. He still couldn’t remember who, or what, or *why*, or— for fuck’s sake, how he’d managed to hit the ground without—

“Stan— ”

“What?” Stan snapped. Immediately, he felt bad. Butters’ hands shot up by his face, like he was surrendering or something. His eyes were wide, and he stared at Stan intently. With a sigh, Stan looked away. “Sorry, shit... today’s been a weird day, and I just...”

Stan made a vague wave-like gesture, as if that could dismiss his actions or make the situation make any more sense. It didn’t, obviously, but Butters didn’t seem too bothered by it. “It’s fine,” he finally replied, lowering his hands back down to his sides. It was then that Stan realized Butters wasn’t dressed in the gym outfit. He wore his normal clothes. He was struck with the question of why Butters was here.

“How did you find me?” Stan asked. Butters blinked.

“Well, actually, I didn’t find you,” he admitted, sheepish in tone. He bumped his knuckles together. “You have Kenny to thank for that. I’m just here to make sure you don’t kill yourself, or— or nothin’.”

Stan made a face at that, but didn’t say anything. He was about to ask where Kenny was, but he didn’t have to. The door to the gym busted wide open, and in walked the aforementioned part in the equation. Kenny held a water bottle in one hand, and he plodded over in one of the most casual, nonchalant ways Stan might have ever seen.

“Hey, there he is!” exclaimed Butters, pointing like Stan hadn’t been aware of the very loud noise from the door. “Were your ears burning, mister?”

“Yes, Butters, my ears were burning,” Kenny replied. He held the water bottle out for Stan to take. Although hesitant, Stan took it without asking any questions. He’d tried to resist Kenny’s care-taking ways, and it hadn’t ended in the way he thought it would. Besides, he still felt guilty for taking advantage of him the way he did. Stan unscrewed the cap and tipped his head back, taking a solid sip. When he lowered it again, he saw Kenny was looking at him. That expression read *I know what you did*, although Stan didn’t even know what he’d done. Kenny shoved his hands into his pockets. “How’re you feelin’?”

Stan shrugged. “Fine,” he said. “Confused, but… fine, overall… do you know what happened?”

Kenny returned Stan’s shrug. “Fuck if I know, man,” he answered, helpful. “I saw ya tumble like a fuckin’ sandcastle too close to the shoreline, and I ran down ‘cause the gym was empty. Did you, like, pass out, or somethin’?”

“I honestly have no idea,” Stan replied. He took another sip of water, surprised at just how parched his mouth and throat were. “I remember running laps, but then— well, y’know. Nothing.”

“Aw,” piped up Butters, “do you need to go to the nurse? Are you sick?”

“No, I don’t— ”

“We can take you to the nurse,” Kenny interrupted. “I’m pretty much an expert on gettin’ people down there, at this point.”

“I don’t need to go to the nurse,” Stan insisted. He screwed the cap back onto the water bottle, and began immediately towards the doors. He pushed it open with his shoulder, and was unsurprised when both Kenny and Butters followed him towards the locker room. That didn’t stop him from rolling his eyes like he didn’t expect it, though. “Guys, I’m fine. I think I’m just dehydrated or something, I didn’t really drink much.”

“When was the last time you ate?” Kenny asked, holding the locker room door open for the three of them. The second door squeaked loudly in protest, which grated on Stan’s brain and made him want to cover his ears. He didn’t, though, and beelined towards his locker.

“This morning,” he finally replied. “I had a balanced breakfast, complete with vegetables.”

“Okay, but was bacon involved?” implored Kenny.

“Duh, bacon was involved,” Stan said.

Stan put the water bottle down on one of the benches and opened his locker, withdrawing his backpack. He shucked off his shirt with little regard for the people who were probably still watching and waiting for him to fuck up somehow. In protest, Stan threw his shirt at Kenny. He missed, resulting in Butters getting a face-full of cotton.

“Hey!” Butters exclaimed, his voice muffled by the shirt. He pulled it off of his face, revealing a frown. “What was that for, buddy?”

“Sorry,” apologized Stan, tugging his regular outfit back on. He caught Kenny’s gaze out of the corner of his eye. They shared a stupid, friendly look of knowing. “I missed.”

Butters, although still apparently a little bit on the defensive, ultimately forgave Stan. Slightly unnecessarily, Butters closed his eyes as he approached Stan, blindly returning the shirt.

“Um, thanks, Butters,” Stan said. Butters nodded, and then slowly shuffled back to where he’d stood before, next to Kenny. Kenny took the opportunity to lay down casually on the bench in the middle of the aisle of lockers. He sighed with dramatic relief, and as Stan pulled on his backpack, he found his mind drifting back to that morning. “So, Kenny, what the fuck?”

“What the fuck what?” replied Kenny.

“You guys were ignoring me,” answered Stan. “Why?”

Kenny yawned loudly, clapping a hand over his mouth to stifle the noise. It didn’t do much, however; he’d already pretty much finished yawning before he covered the sound. His arm fell back down. “Dude, what? We weren’t ignoring you.”

Immediately, Stan called bullshit on that. “You were totally ignoring me,” said Stan. “On the bus, I waved you guys over, but you didn’t even look at me. Did you seriously not see me, or were you ignoring me?”

“Oh, shit, that.” Kenny pushed himself upright, swinging his legs over the side of the bench so he could sit normally. Stan closed his locker. “I honestly didn’t see you, man, I was just so...”

Stan furrowed his brows, waiting for Kenny to explain himself. Kenny rubbed at his face. Stan shot a glance to Butters, who had his arms crossed over his chest. He wasn’t looking at either of them, though, nor did he seem to be paying attention whatsoever. Instead, Butters appeared rather enthralled with the chipping paint on the locker nearest to his elbow.

“I think there’s something going on between fatass and Kyle,” Kenny finally said. Stan’s attention immediately zeroed in on Kenny and his words. “I don’t know what it is, for the life of me— like, I have no fuckin’ clue if I should be concerned or not, y’know?”

Kenny looked up at Stan. Stan felt confused. “What makes you think something is going on?”

“I don’t know, man, there’s just this weird-ass gut feeling I got, like... indigestion, but spiritual. Spiritual indigestion.”

That might have been the weirdest fucking shit Stan had ever heard Kenny say, but at that point, he wasn’t surprised at the analogy.

“Like, they wanted to sit alone,” Kenny added. “In the back, like, they told me they wanted to sit alone, which is weird as fuck and I wasn’t gonna fuckin’ let ‘em do that shit, no fuckin’ way.”

Stan could feel something in his chest pound uncomfortably. “Kyle wanted to sit alone with *Eric*?”

“Well— okay, I don’t know... Eric did all of the talking, but Kyle didn’t, like— *object* or anything. When I say Eric did all of the talking, I mean he did *all* of the talking... hell, Kyle barely said anything until Cartman started spoutin’ those stupid jokes.”

Stan contemplated bringing up what he’d seen in the hallway earlier, with Eric and Kyle. He contemplated telling Kenny about what had been going on between Kyle and himself, but before Stan could say anything, Kenny cut back in.

“Whatever, though, it’s probably nothing.” Kenny stood up, then, stretching his arms up over his head. “C’mon, folks, lets go grab some grub.”

Chapter End Notes

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

The Therapist Friend

Chapter Summary

That was it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The cafeteria, crowded with people rushing to get their food first, remained virtually impossible to navigate for a solid couple of minutes. Especially since Stan had ended up spending passing time down in the locker room, trying to get himself presentable to the general public again. Fortunately, Kenny and Butters remained by his side through the thicket of students. Stan didn't really understand why they were sticking so close to him, but he didn't really question it. They were probably just concerned because he'd been unconscious on the gym floor for a time.

"You better eat something," Kenny told Stan as they approached the lunch line. He'd withdrawn his hands from his pockets once they started needing to casually push past circles of social cliques. Stan wasn't really used to the sheer amount of people who congregated around the lunch line. He had a tendency just to bring something from home— or, forget about food altogether. But his appetite seemed to be back in full force today, so Stan knew skipping wouldn't be an option.

"I know, I know," replied Stan. Finally, it was their turn to grab a tray, and each of them did. Stan contemplated grabbing a milk, but upon further pondering, he decided he didn't really trust the stuff the school supplied. He still had that bottle of water Kenny had brought him, anyway. They approached the salad bar, and Kenny pushed Stan to the front of their tiny group. He stumbled forward, catching himself before he hit the lunch tray railing. He spun around. "The hell?"

Kenny just grinned and said, "salad."

Stan rolled his eyes, turning his attention back to the slightly-sad-looking lettuce and other such vegetable add-ons. Although he typically didn't get fruit or vegetables for lunch (not healthy, he knew, but in his defense, produce wasn't the lunch line's strong suit), he was honestly craving something solid and substantial. Just a shitty cheeseburger wouldn't be enough. In fact, a shitty cheeseburger didn't even sound good. He'd rather have chicken.

They didn't have chicken.

Stan settled for a shitty cheeseburger.

Kenny's hands were back in his pockets again, and Stan found something wrong with that. He stopped where he stood, having payed for his lunch. Kenny resembled a shadow in the way he followed. *Fuck it*, Stan thought.

"Hey, Kenny." Kenny looked up when addressed, and as soon as he did, Stan held the lunch tray out for him to take. For a moment, he simply examined it. "Take this, I'll be back in a second."

Kenny withdrew his hands from his pockets, grabbing the tray hesitantly. "Wh— " but that was all he managed, before Stan turned and went straight back to the lunch line. He didn't look up to gauge Kenny's reaction, nor did he give a reaction when Butters, who was still checking the dates on the milk, looked at him with confusion.

"Hey, weren't you— " began Butters, but Stan simply grabbed a tray and continued on. When he payed for the second round of food, he walked back to Kenny. Needless to say, the look on Kenny's face was nothing if not shocked.

"Um," Kenny said, "did you hit your head on the way down, or...?"

"No," replied Stan. He nodded towards the tray Kenny still held in his hands. "That's for you."

With wide eyes, Kenny immediately began to argue. "Wait, hold on, I didn't say— you *really* didn't need to do this, dude— "

Stan would admit, he felt a little bit cheeky when he interrupted to say, "that's where you're wrong, friend."

Kenny stumbled, obviously unsure of how he was supposed to react to that. He glanced regularly between his tray and Stan's. Some kid pushed past them with a soft mutter of, "move it, ass," but neither Stan nor Kenny payed the guy any mind. "Thank you," Kenny suddenly said, tipping his head down in a way that was borderline embarrassed. No, not embarrassed— maybe a better word would be bashful.

A few moments later, Butters roved up behind them, squeezing into their little chat with ease. His eyes were immediately drawn to the tray of food Kenny held, and his expression lit up like a Christmas tree. "Aw, Kenny, you got lunch, too? Did you get a bonus?"

Kenny shot a look to Stan, and Stan gave a tiny, infinitesimal shrug. "Yeah, you could say that," Kenny finally responded, licking over his lips to ease the dryness. His grip tightened on the lunch tray; his hands still needed lotion. Stan wished he could help Kenny out with that one, too, but he didn't have any. Kenny shifted his posture, gesturing towards the regular lunch table. "C'mon, lets go sit."

The trio moved through the lunchroom with a more simplistic air, finding it much easier to navigate now that some of the passionate circles of teenagers had gone to sit at intermittent tables throughout the area. A few weirdos even went to sit outside, which Stan would never understand. It was fucking freezing outside, for goodness' sake. In a way, though, he didn't really care to understand it. He had more important things on his mind.

Kyle was already at the table. He nibbled at the crust of his sandwich, and his lips had gained a renewed chapped look. He must have been biting them recently. Those lips reminded him of Tweek's, and the blood that bubbled to the surface from one nip too many. It discomforted Stan, to say the least. He moved to sit next to Kyle, but as soon as he did, Kyle squirmed further away and huddled closer to the table. Although hurt, Stan allowed him the personal space. He sat down across from Kyle, instead. Butters sat next to Stan.

"Kyle, what's up?" Kenny greeted casually, a large grin on his face. He slid into the seat Stan had previously attempted to take. Kyle seemed significantly more comfortable with that, though he didn't ease up on his tense posture. Stan tried to lean down to see Kyle's face better—he just wanted to gauge how he might be feeling. Apparently, that wasn't allowed, because Kyle simply tucked his head down even further, his face being hidden by his ushanka.

Really starting to feel upset, now, Stan glanced at Kenny with concern. His gaze was met with a perplexed shrug. They all looked at Kyle when he drew in a breath like he was about to reply. His words were interrupted by a distinct buzzing, though—and Kyle nearly jumped out of his seat as he tried to find his phone in his bag. Kenny and Stan shared another look. Butters remained willfully oblivious.

Stan speared a tomato with his fork and took a bite out of the slice, paying particular attention to Kyle's body language as determined by the content of the text. There was a lot of anxiety radiating from him, and everyone else at the table seemed to feel it. Stan certainly did.

Whatever tension had been collecting in Kyle, however, suddenly released in the form of an extremely relieved sigh. Kyle shut his phone off and dropped it onto the table. All attention was back on him immediately, especially when he straightened in his seat and looked at Stan directly. The sudden eye contact was intense, and it took everything in Stan's power not to instinctively look away.

"I'm so sorry," Kyle blurted, picking at little pieces of grain from the bread of his sandwich. "I'm so fucking sorry about earlier, I'm so sorry I was avoiding you, I just really needed some space and I didn't know how to ask for it without sounding like a total jackass, so I turtled and probably made everything a hundred times *worse* and I'm so, so, *so* sorry."

Christ, that must have been one really inspiring text.

"Um," Stan muttered, unintentionally glancing towards his salad. "It's fine, I understand, no hard feelings, just— let me know next time you need some space, instead of flinching away, or whatever."

Almost frantically, Kyle nodded. "I know, I know, I'm sorry— god, I'm *sorry*." The blush he'd attained on his face read that he felt he'd embarrassed himself, and Stan couldn't help but feel a little guilty about that. He watched as Kyle picked his sandwich back up and began eating it, pausing between tiny bites to bury himself in chewing.

"Kyle, seriously, it's fine," said Stan. He unwrapped his burger, though didn't make any moves to actually eat it. "I'm just concerned about you, is all— especially after seeing what happened with Eric."

Kenny perked up at that, mid-bite on his own cheeseburger. Kyle gave an exhausted sigh at the mention. “Can we not do this right now? It’s not that big of a deal.”

“Not that big of a deal?” Stan replied, unable to help himself from the defensive instinct. He dropped the plastic fork onto his tray, gesturing sharply as he said, “Eric fucking groped you, man, that’s kind of a big deal.”

Kenny’s mouth dropped open, his eyes flaming. He snapped his gaze to Kyle, who looked nothing short of exasperated. “He *what*?” Kenny snapped.

Looking around at the other three at the table, Butters piped up, “oh, jeez, Eric really did that?”

“I knew there was something going on between the two of you,” Kenny hissed. He angrily stabbed some pieces of lettuce with his fork. “What the fuck is going on, dude? You’ve been acting weird as shit with him, lately— he hasn’t done anything *else*, has he?”

“Christ, no!” Kyle exclaimed, shaking his head furiously. “He hasn’t done anything else, it was just a one time thing, can you guys fucking chill out? Oh my god. It’s literally not a big deal. Did he go too far? Yeah, he went too far, but it’s not the worst thing he’s done.”

No one said anything to that for a solid minute. Kyle had gone back to eating his sandwich, practically glaring at the table as he did so. Stan and Kenny shared a third look, and Butters seemed more than a little uncomfortable with what had gone down. Stan wanted to protest, but he didn’t. He knew doing so would just infuriate Kyle further, and he wasn’t in the mood to keep pissing him off. Kenny, on the other hand, held no such qualms. He leaned closer to Kyle, swirling the fork full of lettuce for effect. “Are you *sure* you don’t want us to beat his ass? Because we can, and we will. Just say the word.”

That was it. Kyle’s eye actually twitched, and in a long growl, he said, “I’m not defenseless, for fuck’s sake, so stop acting like I am. If he does it again, trust me, I will break every miserable bone in his pathetic little body.”

If anyone wanted to argue the semantics of Kyle using the word *little* to describe someone as contrary to that as possible, no one showed it. They simply took Kyle’s word for it, understanding his passion and anger for the issue. Kyle tore off bits of his sandwich, only to set them on the napkin in front of him. Stan wondered if he was doing that to let off some steam, but he didn’t have to wonder for long. He knew that was the exact reason.

Stan wanted to say something to break the silence— to get the attention off of the stiffness lingering from Kyle’s tiny outburst. He entertained a thought that disgusted him, and made him want to curl in on himself in embarrassment. The thought he entertained was tiny, but powerful, and he opened his mouth to entertain the thought aloud, but he didn’t get that far.

A firm hand clasped on Stan’s shoulder, and he twisted in his seat to look at the person touching him. He was met with a swarm of navy blue.

“Hey, Marsh,” Craig said, lifting his hand and running his fingers through Stan’s hair in one swift movement. “Your hair looks dumb.”

Stan rolled his eyes and righted himself in his seat, combing his fingers through his hair to fix it from Craig's stupid action. "Right, yeah, I forgot I was supposed to ask your permission for all of my fashion choices," retorted Stan sarcastically. Craig forced an extra chair between where Stan and Butters sat, and Butters responded to that with a quiet, "oh, okay". Without further ado, Craig plopped himself down in the chair and reclined in it like he was welcome. Stan made a face. "Um, dude."

"What?" replied Craig. "You got a problem with me sitting, fuzzball?"

"Yeah, I got— wait, did you just call me fuzzball?"

Craig shrugged. "Seemed fitting, all things considered."

"Will you shut up about my hair?"

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?" Kyle asked. Craig, unamused, looked at Kyle like he was an inconvenience. That made Stan feel a little frazzled.

"Dunno, but it's not you, that's for sure," Craig answered.

Kyle's mouth fell open. "Excuse me?"

Craig flipped him off.

Kenny decided to step in at that point. "Guys, stop, no more bickering, it's lame." He finished the final bite of his cheeseburger, crinkling the thin wrapper it had come in between his palms. After swallowing, he asked, "Craig, do you need something?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, Craig said, "yeah, I got some shit to talk to fuzzball about."

"Stop calling me fuzzball," Stan argued.

All Craig said to that was, "no."

What a dick.

"Um, okay," Kenny said, "talk to him, then."

A muscle in Craig's jaw twitched, though he didn't appear to be on the verge of saying anything. His eyes had trained on Kenny with this intense look, like he was trying to take advantage of some sort of telepathic bond. Kenny, after a moment, furrowed his brows and threw the ball of wrapper towards Craig. Craig didn't move, even when it smacked his shoulder and rolled down his sleeve, onto the floor.

There was a split second where no one did anything else, but then Craig shifted forward, leaning his elbows on the surface of the table. His haphazard action rustled the table, and Butters squawked when his tray was jostled almost over the edge. Craig, suddenly addressing the whole table, said, "*alone*." Kenny wasn't a fan of that.

“This is our table, go talk the talk over yonder,” Kenny argued. He jabbed a thumb in gesture over his shoulder, towards the back of the lunch room where no one was hanging out. Craig, however, didn’t move a muscle. He’d fallen back into statue mode, and his firmness was a little off-putting, if Stan were to be honest.

“You can have the table back when I’m done here,” Craig stated. “I just need it for a few minutes.”

“Stop being all cryptic and just *talk* already,” Kyle growled. Craig zeroed in on him, observing. Kyle’s stubbornness was no match for Craig, however, and he set down his sandwich bits and scooted himself closer to the table, blocking himself in. With narrowed eyes and a rough gravel, Kyle continued, “whatever you say to him, you can say in front of us.”

Craig glanced at Stan, who stared on with wide eyes. Stan didn’t know what to do— what would Craig say? What if it was about the drugs? He couldn’t have Kyle know about that. Before he could respond to the situation, Craig had grabbed Stan’s sleeve and stood the two of them up. Stan caught some statement that was along the lines of, “you coming, Marsh?” but he didn’t have a choice in the matter. Craig practically dragged him away from the table.

Kyle, Kenny, and Butters all turned to watch them leave.

The chatter in the cafeteria felt a lot louder now, and Stan could acutely pinpoint the movements of every student within his field of vision. To say it was overwhelming would be an understatement.

They settled near the drinking fountains, just outside of the boy’s bathroom. Stan half expected Craig to push him against the wall and threaten him, or something, but that didn’t happen. Quite the contrary, really; Craig backed himself into the corner next to the drinking fountain, his arms crossed and weight against the wall. Stan was left in the open, able to run away, and yet strangely terrified of the freedom to move. Stan shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“What do you want?” he asked. Craig didn’t open his mouth to respond. He just rolled his neck on his shoulders, and stared at Stan impatiently. Stan’s brows twitched. “What?”

Craig nodded behind Stan. Paranoid, Stan turned around. Just as he did, someone exited the boy’s bathroom. Clyde Donovan whistled as he walked, looking stupid in that cockiness of his. But then he saw Craig and Stan, and he stopped short, mouth still pursed mid-whistle.

After a very, very awkwardly long silence, Clyde muttered, “huh”, spun on his heel, and walked right back into the boy’s bathroom. Stan turned to give Craig a weird look.

“You pulled me over here to watch Clyde be an idiot?” Stan asked. Craig shook his head.

“No, that was just an added bonus,” he responded.

“The fuck is he even doing in there?”

Craig shrugged. "Fuck if I know."

Great. They were getting nowhere fast, and Stan still didn't understand this guy any better than he had in the first place. Stan scratched the side of his neck, just under the right side of his jaw. He shifted his weight, trying to find a more comfortable position. Clyde exited the bathroom a few seconds later, back to his cocky self. He didn't acknowledge them the second time around, he simply walked right back into the crowded cafeteria. Craig and Stan were officially alone. Craig shifted, drumming his fingers on his arm.

"Why?" he asked, and Stan just blinked.

"Why what?" Stan replied.

Not shying away, Craig said bluntly, "the LSD. Why?"

Stan shrugged. "Dunno," he answered. He rubbed the back of his neck. Craig tilted his head to the left, his eyes gazing in little, twitching patterns over Stan's being. Something in Craig's jaw twitched again.

"Bullshit," he said in a tone that was distinctly familiar to Stan. Craig uncrossed his arms, resting one against the side of the drinking fountain. He used his free hand to wave vaguely towards Stan. "You know exactly why, you're just not saying it."

"I honestly don't know," Stan said. Of course, Craig wasn't having it. Craig pushed himself away from the wall and the drinking fountain, approaching Stan with a large step. He stopped, their chests close. Craig loomed over Stan in a way that wasn't literal.

Craig's blue eyes looked more gray, now that Stan had the ability to look at them. Subconsciously, Stan couldn't help but liken the color to icicles on a drowsy winter day. He fought the urge to smile at how stupidly poetic that was, and tipped his head down to avoid looking at Craig for much longer.

The astute bastard noticed everything. Craig grabbed Stan's shoulder with a firm hand, jilting him just the smallest bit. Stan looked at Craig. His mouth betrayed him. He smiled.

"What're you smiling at?" Craig asked. His brows twitched downward. Then, when he got no response: "what the fuck are you planning, Marsh?"

A feeling drifted through Stan that told him to do something he refused to. He tried to stop smiling, tried to adjust his gaze to tell Craig what he was thinking, but it didn't work. His brain had broken. He began to chuckle, pressing a hand over his mouth to stifle the sound. Craig's expression appeared slightly more intense.

"Are you seriously laughing?"

"You're fucking *worried* about me," Stan said, snorting through the words like it was the funniest shit in the world. It wasn't, of course—in fact, if he were of normal mind, he would probably find this rather concerning, himself. He wasn't, though, and he tried to distance

himself from that idea as much as possible. Craig shoved Stan's shoulder, causing Stan to stumble back just an inch.

"Worried about you?" Craig replied, tilting his head again. His eyes twitched into a narrow. "I'm not worried about you, it's just painfully obvious that something is going on with you, and I don't want you to do anything fucking stupid."

Stan's chuckles increased in fervor. His body told him this was funny, and he couldn't help it. He couldn't stop. He felt high, kind of, even though he hadn't taken any drugs in... what, a week? "I'm not gonna do anything *stupid*, dude," he finally said once he'd calmed down, sighing after his statement. Craig was quiet. Then, his shoulders drooped— just the slightest.

"Whatever," he returned, his tone a little spiteful. He glanced over to Stan's table, where the other three boys seemed to have moved on from Stan's leave. "You better get back to your dumb friends."

Stan hesitated. "Yeah, whatever."

The look Craig gave him made him feel weird.

Stan pulled his sleeves over his hands and crossed his arms, hugging them tightly to his chest. Craig took a step back.

"If you ever need to talk," began Craig, "you got my number."

"Yeah, whatever." Stan wondered if it was lame of him to say the same thing twice. Craig didn't seem to give a shit. In fact, the only thing Stan got in response was a kick to the ankle. Stan resisted the urge to kick Craig back, and simply wandered back to his table. He barely caught Craig flipping him off out of the corner of his gaze.

The bell to signify the end of lunch rang just as Stan slid back into his seat. It was a bit of a rush, he wouldn't lie; Kyle and Kenny gathered their stuff quickly. Stan simply followed their lead, picking up his tray of not even half-finished food and following the two to the trash can. Butters lingered at the table, seemingly not bothered by the fact that the bell had rung. Butters held two carrot sticks, apparently making them fight. He did so with squinted eyes, his tongue sticking out of his mouth in focus. It was ridiculous. Kenny must have found it pretty amusing, because he didn't end up leaving the lunch room with Stan and Kyle. No, instead Kenny drifted right back to the lunch table to sit next to Butters.

Stan didn't really pay much attention to that, though. If they wanted to be late to their next class, that was fine by him. Besides, he was more concerned with catching up to Kyle, who was power-walking straight to the cafeteria's exit.

"Kyle," Stan called after him. At first, Kyle didn't do anything in response. He simply kept walking. Stan rolled his eyes and increased the speed of his walk to a mild jog so he could catch up. Again, he tried, "dude, *Kyle*."

Kyle glanced up from his phone, immediately shutting it off. With furrowed brows, he asked, "hey, what's up?"

“Can I walk with you?” replied Stan. Kyle’s expression twitched like that was the stupidest question he’d ever been asked.

“Duh,” he said.

And that was that.

The two exited the lunchroom, pushing through and weaving between individuals on their ways to classes. They settled into the flow of hallway traffic, relatively silent for a majority of their walk. At one point, Stan pointed out some stupid sign pinned up on the cork board, and Kyle snorted a smart-aleck quip back. Things felt casual and normal, but every time Kyle would look at Stan, Stan would immediately be brought back to the thoughts of his warmth. His fingers tingled to hold Kyle’s hand, and he wanted to pull him close and wrap an arm over his shoulder and kiss his cheek and say *I love you*.

Stan did none of that.

They came to a stop at the end of one of the hallways. Kyle’s class was up the stairs to the left, but Stan’s next class was the door to the right. He couldn’t walk Kyle to his next class if he wanted to make it to his own on time. Stan stopped outside of the door, and Kyle paused to wave a temporary goodbye. “I’ll see you in seventh,” he said, smiling. Stan smiled back. They gave each other a mutual nod, and then Kyle turned to leave.

Stan didn’t mean to grab Kyle’s hand, but he did. Kyle stopped and turned, his brows furrowed in confusion. Stan’s heart sped up in his chest, and his cheeks heated up.

“Do you need something?” Kyle asked slowly. Stan swallowed.

“Are you— sure you’re okay?” Stan blurted. Kyle appeared surprised.

“I’m fine,” he answered. “Why?”

“It’s just...” but Stan trailed off. What was he planning on saying? What could he even say? Could he put it into words? His brain played out a scenario where he hugged Kyle, but he didn’t. Instead, Stan gave a tiny shrug, his fingers tightening their hold on Kyle’s hand. “You don’t have to act stoic all the time.”

That almost seemed to offend Kyle. He bristled. “What do you mean?”

“Like— I don’t know, the Eric thing,” Stan replied. Kyle’s gaze narrowed. Stan felt ridiculous for not being able to let it go, but he couldn’t help it. Seeing Eric grab Kyle like that just felt really, really wrong— and *really* gross, and he wasn’t even the one on the receiving end. “You can say it bothered you, y’know, like... it’s okay.”

Kyle opened his mouth, but appeared at a loss for words. His gaze fluttered towards where Stan still held his hand, and then he glanced with quick looks around the hallway. Stan took that as a sign to continue.

“I’m here if you ever want to, like, talk, or anything— ”

“I wanted it.”

Stan froze.

Kyle’s gaze met his own with a renewed confidence, like he’d finally gathered the courage to be honest. Stan couldn’t help but stare. Something inside of his chest squeezed.

“What?” he whispered.

Something flashed through Kyle’s irises, but it was gone as soon as it had come. Kyle straightened his posture, looked Stan straight in the eyes, and said, “I wanted him to do it.”

Stan let go of Kyle, who proceeded to stuff both hands into his coat pockets.

“I asked him to,” Kyle continued, and Stan wanted nothing more than to tell him to stop, he didn’t want to know any more, he didn’t want to hear it, but— “I wanted to see what it’d feel like.”

Stan said nothing.

“So, yeah, you don’t need to worry about it,” Kyle finished. His gaze averted, and Stan looked away, too. Stan’s feet itched to kick the floor, but he stayed still. It felt like an eternity passed before Kyle repeated, “I’ll see you in seventh.”

Kyle turned and walked up the stairs. He didn’t look back.

Stan’s heart hurt.

Chapter End Notes

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Dandelions

Chapter Summary

Just a few more hours.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It would probably have been a lie to say the backpack wasn't a burden. Even without anything in it, it weighed Stan down like it held millions of pounds of sand. Even just looking at it was enough to make him feel heavy. So, in the middle of German class, with Frau Klein busy helping a group of students catch up on their conversation lesson from last week, he made the executive decision to rid himself of it completely. The only question left was how.

Stan drew little swirls into his notebook with his pencil, paying very little attention to the designs slowly covering the page. His gaze was elsewhere, examining the room with mild attention as he contemplated his next move. It was simple, in retrospect, and he knew that doing it wouldn't require much effort. The thing that stood in his way was the fact that he needed to talk to someone in English to get it taken care of, which Frau Klein would definitely not like hearing. She was a pretty hardcore woman, and the last thing he wanted was to piss her off (which, honestly, wasn't difficult to do).

After a few minutes of weighing the pros and cons against each other, Stan decided to go for it and say "fuck it" to the consequences. If he kept his voice down, Frau Klein would have no idea he was even talking. He just needed to be sneaky.

Stan drew his attention to Butters, who sat across from him at their group table. The classroom didn't have desks, which made it easier for in-class discussion projects and the like. Usually, each table had three people, but their third person rarely abode by the rule of sticking to the assigned seat. So, more often than not, it was just himself and Butters. He was lucky that Butters seemed to have a natural talent for this sort of thing.

He was also lucky that Butters was the exact person he needed.

Stan shifted in his seat, carefully contemplating his next move. How could he get Butters' attention with the least amount of public distraction as possible? He had an overwhelming urge to kick Butters under the table, but he decided that might be kind of a dick move, not to mention Butters wasn't exactly shy in his outward expressions of being startled. He could roll a pencil over to him, or reach over and draw something on his side of the table, or he could wave, or write a note... the possibilities were endless, really, but after a few extra minutes of contemplation, Stan decided it'd just be best to go the simple route with the tried and true method of actually talking to him.

“Hey,” he said, leaning forward in his seat so Frau Klein would (hopefully) not hear them. Butters didn’t do much. In fact, he didn’t respond at all. He appeared much too interested in the worksheet he’d been managing throughout the entirety of class. Stan reached over and tapped Butters’ paper, accompanying his gesture with another quiet, “Hey, Butters, I have a question.”

Butters practically flailed, sliding down in his seat a little. Although his reaction seemed a little extreme for the simplicity of what Stan was doing, no one in the class seemed to notice. For that, Stan was thankful. Butters looked at Stan with wide, almost horrified, eyes. Almost automatically, Butters quietly responded, “*no English!*” in hasty German.

Stan rolled his eyes. He almost considered acquiescing to Butters’ distress, but he ultimately decided it wouldn’t be worth it. Sure, he knew German well enough to hold out the conversation with few issues, it just felt a little arbitrary and asinine to do so. Frau Klein wasn’t listening, nor was anyone else. Besides, it wasn’t like he would be talking German for much longer, anyway. A few minutes of English in place of a foreign language wouldn’t matter. “Butters, it’s not that big of a deal,” Stan whispered. “Just work with me for a minute, and you can go back to... whatever you’re doing.”

Obviously, the idea of breaking rules was horrifying to Butters. His eyes widened further, and his expression tightened like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Stan found it slightly amusing, if not primarily annoying. A more confident look suddenly crossed Butters’ face, and his eyes narrowed just the tiniest bit. He opened his mouth, and Stan could practically see the response before it came out.

“Butters, I swear to god, if you respond in German.”

Butters closed his mouth, and the stubborn look faded. The unsaid threat was enough to get him to contemplate. For a second, that concerned Stan, but he ultimately pushed it away from himself in favor of turning his attention back to what he needed.

“I talked to Tweek the other day,” Stan prefaced, “and he told me about how you design bags and stuff for people, like— I saw the one you did for Craig, and it looked really neat...”

Butters tilted his head, nibbling on the eraser of his pencil as he listened. Stan cleared his throat, very quietly, trying to get up the stupid courage to ask for it.

“Anyway, um... could you do one for me?”

Butters was silent for a long moment, still nibbling on the erasure of his pencil. He glanced down at the table, his brows knitted together like he was contemplating something. He turned to look over his shoulder, like he was concerned someone was listening in, and then turned back to Stan. “Yeah, of course I can do one for ya,” he said, smiling a little. “Just as long as you supply the bag, of course... I tried buying bags for people before, but my parents were awful sore with me, sayin’— *Butters, why are you buying all of these bags for? Don’t ya understand the— the ‘conomy’s tight, son, we can’t afford t’buy alla this crap...*”

Stan wasn’t sure what to say to that, for a while. He just watched, particularly lost when Butters seemed to snap out of his verbatim recollection of being told off for buying bags.

Butters was very quiet for a few seconds, before apparently realizing where he was again, and dropping his pencil down on the table. It clacked softly.

“Um, but, yeah, ‘course I can,” concluded Butters. Stan was quiet himself for a second, before regaining his momentum in the conversation.

“I got the bag, so you don’t have to worry about that,” Stan said. He reached down and picked up his empty backpack. He set it on the table in front of Butters, who looked at it with what Stan could only describe as a technical or contemplative gaze. Butters picked up the backpack, thumbing against the fabric and turning it over in his hands.

“What do you want on it, buddy?” Butters asked, apparently done examining the bag. He set it casually down on the floor. Stan opened his mouth to respond, but Butters interrupted before he could say anything. “Oh! Wait, hold on a sec, I gotta...”

Butters ducked below the table, rustling through his own backpack to find something. A second later, he popped back up with a doodle-covered notebook, which he leafed through momentarily before settling on an empty page. He put his pencil to the paper, ready to write.

“Okay, *now* what do ya want on it?”

Stan took a few seconds to think on that. What *did* he want on it? What would look nice on it? How could he possibly know what would look nice on an old, plain backpack? Stan wasn’t all that artsy, so he couldn’t exactly gauge this sort of thing. It was difficult to come up with a mental picture for it.

But eventually, something came to him. Almost nervously, Stan shifted in his seat.

“Dandelions,” Stan said. Butters furrowed his brows, apparently intrigued by the idea, before jotting that down on the notebook paper.

“Why dandelions?” asked Butters.

“Because...” Stan trailed off, turning to look off to the side. How could he phrase it? How could he explain it without giving too much away? There was a part of him that wanted to say everything, but that part of him was shut down by the rest of him. Stan lowered his gaze, rubbing his palm with his thumb. “I think they might need them.”

Butters peeked up from the notebook, looking at Stan with a perplexed expression. Stan met his gaze, and even though it was obvious Butters wanted to ask more questions, he managed to hold himself back. “Anything else?” he asked. Stan shook his head. Butters took that as a signal to move on. He tore the page with the single word of “dandelions” out of the notebook, folded it up all neat and tidy, and proceeded to put it into the backpack Stan had given to him. Butters placed the notebook into his own backpack, and sat back up in his chair.

That seemed to be it. Content with how that had gone down, Stan turned his attention back to his own notebook. He examined the doodles and spirals he’d covered the page in, and after realizing the page was definitely not salvageable, he turned it and repeated the absentminded process of swirling designs of graphite.

“Stan, isn’t this your backpack?” Stan looked up at Butters, then, almost surprised at having been addressed after things seemed to have finished. Butters’ expression was furrowed and a little perplexed, though he appeared more curious than anything else.

“Yeah, it’s mine,” Stan answered, giving a small nod. He drew a series of lines along the edge of his notebook paper, halfheartedly trying to make them as straight and parallel as possible. Butters frowned, resting his chin in his palm.

“Aren’t you gonna need it, buddy?” he asked.

“No, I don’t need it anymore.”

“Aw, are you getting a new one? I don’t mean to be rude, or nothin’, but the one you got is a little messy. I think it has a hole in the side...” Butters trailed off when he saw the furrowed-brow look on Stan’s face, however, and quickly backtracked, raising his palms up by his face. “I don’t mean that as a bad thing, or nothing, I think it adds to the— well, Kenny calls it the *tear ‘n wear* aesthetic.”

Stan snorted. “The *tear ‘n wear* aesthetic?”

Butters nodded. “Yeah! It’s where— like, on jeans and stuff, you scuff up the knees to make yourself look rugged and outdoorsy, or somethin’, or you just buy a pair that come already-torn. Isn’t that a fashion style? I see you wear it all the time.”

“I don’t wear ripped jeans,” said Stan. This seemed to shock Butters, and he blinked rapidly at the revelation.

“Oh, hamburgers— you don’t?”

Stan shook his head. “Not on purpose, at least,” he added. He didn’t expand on that— doing so would be useless. Butters probably understood the point without any extra words or explanations. Stan ran his fingers through his hair, scratching his nails lightly against his scalp as he thought. His eyes caught the corner of the table, and he found himself drawn to the juxtaposition of the light edge against the dark carpet of the classroom.

How much longer was left in this class? When would the bell ring? Stan glanced towards the clock on the wall, just a little anxious for time to speed up. He wanted the end of school to come faster. He wanted to see Kyle, but in a way he dreaded looking him in the eyes in final period. Kyle’s words were still echoing in his head. Thinking about them made his stomach hurt. He shut his eyes against the offending thoughts, trying to will them out of his mind. *C’mon, just think of something else, anything else.*

Stan sat up a little straighter in his chair, rolling his shoulders back to readjust his posture. *No*, said his brain, *keep your head up, you’re happy today. Just a few more hours.*

“You didn’t answer my question,” Butters whispered. Stan looked over.

“What question?” he replied. Butters softly rapped his knuckles against the table, glancing around the room like he had earlier. Frau Klein had moved from the front of the room to the

back, discussing something with a different group of students. Stan understood a majority of what they were saying without actively thinking about it, which would never not weird him out. Sometimes it felt like his brain was in an eternal state of German-English translation.

“Y’know,” said Butters, now bumping his knuckles together. Stan rested his chin in his palm, bored in his pencil-rolling. Butters gestured towards Stan’s backpack. “Are you getting a new one?”

Stan only shrugged, rubbing his forehead with the heel of his free palm. “Sure,” he said, glancing to examine the left side of the room. “Something like that, yeah.”

Just ten more minutes, Stan told himself, his gaze reattaching to the clock. Distantly, he heard Butters whispering some more stuff about backpacks— Stan’s in particular. Stan straightened out in his seat, and almost startled when he realized Frau Klein was right behind Butters. The poor guy didn’t even realize she was there, and he was still going on about something or other to do with the backpacks. Stan had tuned him out, honestly. For a second, he felt a little bad about doing so. The least he could have done was pay attention to the guy before he was chewed out by their angry German teacher.

Stan buried himself decidedly into his notebook when Frau Klein began to scold Butters about talking in English. She said something about *only German*, which was exactly what Stan was expecting. What he did not expect was for her to walk away muttering “*I hate English*”. Did it make sense? Sure, it made sense, that was probably why she was a German teacher. It just felt a little hostile. Was that Stan being a pussy? Now that he thought about it, probably.

He would probably be upset if he taught a foreign language and the kids didn’t try to speak it, too. Stan came to the conclusion that he was the one being a dick, and while he wasn’t about to apologize to Frau Klein, he would certainly apologize to Butters, if he got the chance after class.

Stan didn’t have to wait long. As soon as the bell rang, he opened his mouth to apologize to Butters for insisting on English, but he didn’t get that far. Butters had beat him to talking, his mouth running a mile a minute as he rapidly asked for Stan to “please come with me to bring your backpack to my locker, I gotta lotta stuff to carry, and I only have two hands...”

Unwilling to distress an already thoroughly flustered Butters, Stan gladly picked up his backpack and pulled it onto his shoulder. Not a second later, he went the extra mile in being helpful, figuring that Butters had enough on his plate for the time being. “Hey, I can take those textbooks, too, if you want,” he offered, holding his hands out. Butters’ expression translated to relief, and he thanked Stan quickly as he handed them over. Stan took them without complaint.

They left the classroom quickly, not wanting to be subject to Frau Klein’s lingering sharpness or wrath. Thankfully, she only let out a quiet goodbye to all of her students— the most they suffered was a small bit of a cold shoulder. Stan wasn’t bothered by that. He had significantly more important things on his mind.

Butters led Stan down the hallway, talking rather avidly about the things going on in his head. Some of the things he said didn't really make much sense, like where he was talking about superheroes and super villains, or the part where he went on a tangent about his father telling him to stop mixing up the hamburger helper with the riceroni. Stan couldn't help but snort at that. Butters shot Stan a look, but otherwise didn't say much about his reaction, which Stan was grateful for.

Eventually, they drew closer to the locker bay, and their conversation followed a relatively linear path that Stan could easily keep track of. "So, when do you want this done by? I don't got many orders up right now, it's kinda slow after the holidays, so you got in at a real good time," he said, sidestepping a stray orange peel on the floor. Stan followed his lead, grateful that Butters had seen it, because Stan certainly hadn't.

"I don't really need it done by any specific time," Stan replied. "The sooner the better, though, I guess— I don't really want to leave them hanging for too long, y'know?"

"Why, of course I do," Butters responded. He sidled up next to his locker, shifting everything into one hand and fidgeting with the lock. Stan shifted his weight on his feet, contemplating his further pursuit of the topic he kept trying to avoid. With a smile on his face, Butters added, "I can get it back to ya tomorrow, probably. Should we meet after school? I can give it to ya then, and then you can give it to your sweetheart."

"Sweetheart?" Stan asked, furrowing his brows. Butters nodded.

"Yeah! Isn't that who it's for? A sweetheart?"

Stan genuinely didn't know how to respond to that. He cleared his throat, trying to blink away the blush that he could feel on his cheeks. "I mean, I don't know, I wouldn't describe it that way," he said.

"But you're not denying it," pointed out Butters. Stan decided not to say anything to that specific remark. Instead he moved on by backtracking, thinking about the delivery of his bag to the person he wanted to give it to. Butters finally managed to open his locker, and dropped the things in his hand into it. Stan watched, keeping the textbooks available for Butters to take.

"I don't think I can pick it up," Stan said. Butters, apparently mildly surprised, stopped mid-reach for one of the textbooks Stan held out. Stan didn't allow Butters the opportunity to respond. "So, if you could— like, skip a step, and just... give it to Kyle, whenever you see him next? That'd be, like... much appreciated."

Butters finally retrieved the textbooks from Stan, though he didn't watch what his own hands were doing. He didn't need to; he was coordinated enough on his own. His gaze was caught on Stan's, and Stan's was caught in his. The scar was still slightly visible over his eye. Stan... still felt kind of guilty about that. He felt the sudden, distinct urge to apologize. Butters' brows furrowed, like he didn't understand what Stan had just said. "Why won't you be around?" he asked curiously, tilting his head with the question. "Are ya goin' away somewhere?"

Stan resorted to the simplicity of saying, “yeah, something like that.”

“Oh, really?” Butters said, his expression suddenly much more open. He smiled again, looking a little bit like a goof as he did. “Where are ya going? Anywhere special?”

“Not really,” Stan said, “just up north.”

Butters made a noise of understanding, as if “up north” was enough to let him in on some secret even Stan wasn’t aware of. He pushed the textbooks into his locker, and then held out his hand for Stan to hand over the backpack. Stan did, almost regretting it as he relinquished the bag he’d had for so many years. It felt a little painful, and a little final, like this was going to be *it*.

Stan shook the thought away, shoving the hand that wasn’t holding his notebook and pencil into his pocket. Immediately, he decided against the action, and pulled it back out. He gripped at the notebook, finally hooking the pencil through the spiral spine.

“So, I gotta question for you,” Butters said. Stan looked at him, ready for whatever was coming (while simultaneously dreading the anticipation of something he wasn’t prepared for). “Earlier, you said that Kyle might need the dandelions. Why is that? What can dandelions do?”

Stan shrugged, fighting back the sigh of relief at the simplicity of the question. “It might just be me, but they remind me of how to let go. Or— maybe that’s not the right way to put it. More like, they... make letting go feel a little more okay.”

“That’s an awful deep meaning,” Butters said, laughing a little at the words as they came from his mouth. It faded quickly, though, and soon the only thing left was a tiny smile. Butters closed the door to his locker, drumming the tips of his fingers against the metal door as he secured it with a twist of the lock. “I think it’s sweet, though, for what it’s worth...”

Butters let go of his locker, turning to face Stan completely. The smile was still there, and it made Stan hurt. Like, physically *feel* pain.

“You obviously care an awful lot about him, Stan, and I think that’s really adorable.” And then Butters shut his eyes, and there was that scar, and Stan was consumed by guilt and the world crashing down on his shoulders and he wondered if he could really go through with the rest of this with the regret of being so awful to this kid.

“Butters, could I hug you?” Stan asked. That shocked Butters to his core, and for a second, he didn’t know how to react. Stan could see it on his face. After a moment of thinking, though, Butters nodded.

“Why, of course,” he answered. He held his arms open, accepting the previously mentioned hug. Stan wasted no time. Immediately, he tugged Butters close. He didn’t stop at just an awkward, half-friend hug. He hugged tight, like he meant it, because he did. He meant it.

“I’m sorry for all the shit we put you through,” Stan said, his chin resting on Butters’ shoulder. He heard Butters make a confused noise by his ear.

“What do you mean?” Butters asked.

“Like, your eye,” Stan began, staring at the lockers behind Butters. For a second, he tightened his grip, like that would help steady his overall nervousness. He’d never hugged Butters before. This would almost definitely be the last time. That made him feel weird. This felt weird, and stupid, but it felt like the right thing to do, and he didn’t care who saw. “And just being a total douche to you throughout school, and all that, I don’t know, we were... we *are* dicks. I’m a dick, and I’m sorry. I don’t hate you, or anything, I don’t think any of us do.”

He felt Butters relax in his grip. Soon enough, Butters tightened his own grip on Stan, gently patting Stan’s back with soft motions. “Aw, there there, buddy, I don’t hate you, neither,” said Butters. “It’s okay, I don’t blame you guys, or nothin’— but you all are kind of dicks.”

They both laughed at that, letting the moment sit in the simple, uncharacteristically friendly gesture. Stan decided to pull away a few seconds later, and he returned the pats Butters had given him. They stepped away from each other, both feeling a little lighter from the interaction, like it helped alleviate some weight they hadn’t even realized was there. Stan still didn’t think of Butters as a friend, but... he wasn’t the worst, or anything. Just a little annoying.

Butters’ smile slowly faded, then, his expression mostly full of some quiet empathy. “Are you okay, Stan?” he asked. Stan, of course, nodded.

“I’m good,” he answered, not giving the response a second thought. Something in his brain told him to relent, just vent, talk to him, be honest. But he couldn’t bring himself to do that. The majority of him didn’t want to, and majority ruled over minority, didn’t it?

The warning bell rang. Butters glanced around the hallways, almost appearing shocked at the fact that so much time had passed in such a little window. “Oh, hamburgers—I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll see you later— wait, Butters— ” Butters halted mid-turn, cocking his head to signify he was listening. Stan swallowed. “Just— please, make sure that bag gets to Kyle.”

Butters’ smile reappeared. “Why, of course I will, Stan!” he replied. Then, he traced an ‘x’ over his heart, and finished off with, “I promise.”

Stan smiled in response, and waved a goodbye as Butters rushed off down the halls towards his next class. Stan drew in a deep breath, slowly walking down the opposite hallway. He had his own class to get to. Even if he didn’t want to, he knew he had to.

Just be happy, his brain told him. Just a few more hours, and that’s it.

Chapter End Notes

comments / feedback / constructive criticism; all is welcome!

Ecstasy / Elegy / Requiem

Chapter Summary

STAN: I swear.

Chapter Notes

trigger warning for suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It might have been about fifty minutes before the final bell rang, when Stan began to count down the minutes. His internal monologue was no longer consumed by the anxieties of seeing Kyle, and even during class, as they dealt with an independent group research project, Stan found it hard to focus. He lost himself on more than one occasion, staring towards a corner or examining a crack in the floor a little too closely. Kyle had to intermittently snap his fingers to regain Stan's attention, and each time, Stan apologized profusely. Kyle didn't appear too concerned over it, however, and kept them focused on finishing it before school ended.

Then the final bell rang, and Stan's nerves reached a peak. Kyle and himself split ways in the hallway, separating towards their respective lockers. Stan's internal clock reset. The timer he'd pushed onto himself no longer applied. The fifty minutes was up—his next goal was to get through the next twenty. He just needed to hold himself together on the walk home. He anticipated walking alone, and his feet itched to travel the paths to his house.

Just twenty more minutes, his brain reminded him as he pulled on his winter coat. He elbowed his locker door shut, struggling only minutely with the zipper. He had nothing in his hands. He left the notebook and pencil in his locker. He didn't need to bring anything with him.

He exited the school, his hands shoved into his pockets to keep them safe from the unrelenting cold of winter. Absentmindedly, he fidgeted with his phone, which he still had in his pocket. He ducked his head against a solid gust of wind, but it quickly let up, and he was back to standing straight again. He was met by the sight of his friends—Kyle, Kenny, and Eric, grouped together at the start of the path. He saw Kenny shove Eric, and Eric lifted a threatening hand, though he didn't follow through on the action.

“Dude!” Kyle called, waving at Stan. Stan glanced around. He felt a little idiotic, in that moment. Why was he so caught off-guard by the fact that his friends had waited for him?

Shouldn't this feel normal? He shook off the mild anxiety and approached.

"Hey," he said.

"We were wondering when you were gonna get out here," Kenny butted in, leading the group in their walk. Kyle followed after him, and Stan and Eric meandered near the back.

"Yeah, fuckin' slow-poke, we were freezing out here, goddamn," Eric piped up, elbowing Stan in the ribs. Stan returned the gesture without thinking, and felt a little proud of himself when he received a frustrated "ay!" from Eric.

"Play nice," Kenny warned, tipping his head back in a flimsy attempt at looking behind himself. Kyle nudged Kenny's head back up, rolling his eyes. Stan didn't actually see Kyle roll his eyes, but he knew Kyle's mannerisms. That sort of act was natural for him. It should have been. It...

Stan rubbed the heel of his palm over his eyes, trying to force himself to stop seeing so much when faced with so little. He ignored it, tried to feel bored, tried to feel lost, tried to feel okay, but then there was his brain, tapping at the edges of his skull and whispering *just twenty more minutes, just seventeen more minutes, just ten more minutes...*

Maybe it was mental— Stan certainly wouldn't doubt it being so—, but the closer he drew to his house, the closer the group got to where he lived, the more confused he became. He thought of the house, and thought of the people that had lived in it. He thought of his family, of his mom, and his dad, and, hell— even his sister. He wondered if he should call her tonight. Everything felt like it was going too fast. Everything felt like a blur. What was going on?

To compensate, Stan tried to shut down. His brain told him to say something. Say something. *Just say something*, said his brain. *Just say something*.

And Stan thought to his brain, *shut up*.

Please.

Just shut up.

The timer in his head reached five minutes.

"Stan?"

Stan glanced over, examining his friends with eyes that felt way too open. His brain gripped onto every word they said, even when they'd gone silent. He caught a look in Kyle's eyes, and knew instantly he was the one who had addressed him. Sure enough, Kyle spoke again.

"We're going to go play some basketball down at the court," he said, gesturing behind himself with a thumb. Stan glanced over out of instinct, and said nothing out of habit. "Do you want to come?"

Slowly, so slowly, Stan thought. And then, he shook his head. “Nah,” he responded. “I gotta do some homework.”

“Homework?” sputtered Eric. He grabbed Stan’s hood and lifted it, like he was looking at something on Stan’s back. “I don’t see a fuckin’ backpack, dude.”

“I know, man, I’m not blind,” Stan said. “I was really stupid this morning and left most of my shit at home today. Now I have to double down and get everything done from Friday *and* from today...”

He looked at Kyle. He didn’t know what he was expecting. Kyle’s brows were raised in understanding of the situation, and he nodded. “That’s fine, man,” Kyle told him, a little smile on his face. “There’s always next time, right?”

Stan simply smiled back. He scraped at some lint in the very bottom of his pocket, picking it under his nails and tearing it into smaller threads as well as he could with just one hand and no vision to aid him. His fidgeting kept him from freaking out and backing down from his determination. He kept his attention to the internal timer he’d set for himself. He felt like he could see it, clicking and ticking away in his brain, like the digital clock on his nightstand. He felt like he could feel time folding in on him.

He stopped in front of his house. His friends gave him a calm goodbye, and moved to—

“Wait,” Stan said. They all halted.

Happy, said his brain. *Happy*.

“This is going to sound, like, really gay,” Stan said, huffing a laugh from a shallow point in his lungs. They all appeared confused, and Eric made a scoff of a noise, but otherwise no one did anything to interrupt whatever he was going to say. It felt weird, to have all of their eyes on him so intently. He forced himself to finish his thought before he chickened out. “But, can I, like, hug you guys?”

Eric scoffed again. Kyle furrowed his brows. Kenny just looked understanding. Then, Kenny was grinning, this big, obnoxiously happy grin, and he opened his arms up much like Butters had earlier in the afternoon. Stan’s heart squeezed. “Group hug!” Kenny shouted. He wrapped his left arm around Kyle, who seemed more than a little miffed at the idea of physical interaction. He stumbled forward begrudgingly, though, and soon enough, the three were compacted in one of the stupidest hugs Stan had ever been involved in ever. The only person missing was—

“Get the fuck over here, fatass,” Kyle snapped. Eric sputtered.

“Fuckin’ excuse me? Dude, no way, that’s the floweriest shit I’ve ever seen, like hell I’m getting in on that with you guys,” he argued.

“Get over here before I make you!”

“You can’t make me do anything, Jew!”

"Fucking watch me!" Kyle tugged away from the hug, leaving Kenny and Stan hanging in an overly simplistic half-hug. That only lasted for a few seconds, however, before Kenny grabbed Kyle's coat and pulled him away from attacking Eric. With a red, narrowed face, Kyle escaped Kenny's grip and waved him off. "I wasn't going to hit him," Kyle argued.

"You were *so* going to hit him," Stan replied. Kyle hit Stan's arm playfully.

"Fuck off," he said, though the tone of his voice was nothing but joking. Stan returned the sentiment, nudging Kyle in the ribs.

Stan's chest squeezed. He just had to say one more thing. "I love you guys."

Kenny's grin twitched, like he was forcing it to stay where it was. "We love you too, dude," he said. Kyle nodded in response, his brows still furrowed from his earlier difficulty with Eric. Other than that, though, nothing was out of place.

Except for Eric, whom had left the rest of them behind in favor of meandering further down the sidewalk. Stan couldn't help but laugh a little. Classic Eric.

His eyes felt tired. Stan wiped them again, really digging in with his palms this time. Kyle noticed, and nudged Stan's shoulder gently. Stan dropped his hands, looking at Kyle. They said nothing for a moment. It took a while for Stan to realize it was just them. He could vaguely hear Kenny shouting as he ran after Eric to "get back over there!"

"Hey," Kyle said, his expression relaxed. His cheeks were red from the cold, and the tip of his nose matched in shade. Stan wanted to kiss him, or hug him, or drag him inside and cuddle, but he didn't do any of those things.

Instead, Stan gently reached forward, and took Kyle's hand in his own. He half expected Kyle to pull away, but he didn't. Kyle returned the gesture, squeezing Stan's hand firmly.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asked. Their eyes met, and it was almost too much. Stan felt the urge to be honest. He felt the urge to say what was on his mind, what he wanted to do, what he was afraid of doing. He wanted to have a shoulder to cry on, and he wanted to not feel so... like, alone, anymore? He didn't want to keep going through the motions like a puppet, feeling so useless and out of place. The thoughts burned through his head and dripped down his spine. They threatened his eyes, but he refused to let himself get emotional.

"I'll be fine," Stan responded.

He thought of Kyle. He thought of his hair, of his skin, of his warmth. He thought of his eyes — the same ones he looked into at that moment, with the green and the flecks of gold and the auburn-like edges. It made him think of fall and autumn and Halloween. It made him think of pumpkin pie and cinnamon and caramel and sweetness. It made him think of campfires, and s'mores, and chocolate.

"Are you going to be okay?"

In the moment, Kyle appeared surprised by Stan returning the same question. It was undeniable that, in that moment, they were both transported back to a time where things were simpler. When emotions were normal, when they were just friends, when Stan was still okay with weed, and Kyle was still clean.

Stan felt guilt and regret. He felt unworthy of Kyle. He felt unworthy of anything, really, but Kyle most of all. He squeezed his friend's hand, which ushered the final, soft reply.

"I'll be fine," Kyle said. Stan nodded.

Please be okay.

Kyle let go first, and Stan took that as a sign. It was Kyle. Kyle was good at keeping himself together. Kyle was good in a crisis. Kyle was good at making it through things. Kyle was more than good. He was perfect. In all his little ways, in all his angles and lines and expressions, Kyle was perfect.

Kyle would always be perfect.

Stan let Kyle leave, and maybe that felt like a mistake. As soon as he was left alone, six inches from the end of his driveway, he thought of all of the wasted potential he'd just dropped into the trashcan like burnt and useless weed. Like his sobriety, he let go. Like himself, he forgot. That didn't keep him from wishing, though, that he'd asked for one last kiss goodbye.

When Stan entered, he slid the door shut behind him and yelled, "*I'm home!*" into the house. He was met with nothing but silence, and immediately, he knew he had the house to himself. A glance at the clock told him he had about three or four hours alone. Maybe it was fucked up, but that made him feel excited. It helped him feel happy, even though weights piled on from his feet to his ribs to his shoulders to his head, urging him to collapse onto the carpet and feel it against his skin and bite his lip until it bled and cry until he passed out, curled on his side, to feel like he wasn't just wasting his life doing meaningless bullshit.

God, he was so tired. He felt the loneliness, and he smelled freshman year on the phantom aroma of peppermint. He remembered going so long without talking to anyone, he remembered being high for most of that year, he remembered the crushing emotional debt exploding in him and telling him to give in. He remembered so much.

But you're happy, said his brain. *You'll be happy, and you'll be okay.*

Stan stalked up the steps, listening to the creaks and groans of the wood beneath his feet. They were louder than usual, he noted, which was strange because he distinctly remembered them being almost silent for a long time. Randy's house flipping phase had been almost miraculous for their old house. It patched everything. It kept things together.

Stan tugged his phone out of his pocket and dropped it onto his bedspread. It felt a little disgusting, and his skin felt rubbed raw, and his stomach turned uncomfortably. He pulled out the Toolshed outfit, undid the belt and unwrapped the shirt and pants and...

The plastic.

It glistened, like it knew. Like it was trying to make a good impression on the brain he barely felt like he had. Like it understood everything he was going through, like it could make him feel so much better, if he just took it. He'd done a little research, and he had come to the conclusion that it might be able to help him. Craig had suggested such a thing, too— and the words of the guy still lingered in the back of his head. It's all about mindset. If you're happy, you'll have a good time. If you're sad, you'll have a bad time.

Stan wondered, very briefly, if he was happy enough. He knew the answer.

Stan opened the bag. He didn't hesitate in putting one of the tabs in his mouth. He'd read somewhere that it should go underneath the tongue. So, that's what he did. He plopped himself onto his bed, laid down, and let himself think. The tab was odd, like pennies or iron. It tingled.

Without thinking, Stan grabbed his phone, typed in the pass code, and texted Craig.

SPACEBOOK

Today 15:21

hey whats LSD supposed to taste like?

He received a response relatively quickly.

SPACEBOOK

it is not supposed to taste like anything y r u asking, u asshole

did u take it, u dick

if it is bitter it is a spitter u kno that rite, u idiot?

what? Why?

y the fuck do u think, u fucking moron

Stan thought about the tab inside of his mouth, slowly dissolving underneath his tongue. The taste was, in fact, bitter; some rendition of bitterness, at least. He wondered if that meant it was dangerous.

Stan did not spit it out.

His phone buzzed in his hand. He felt it.

SPACEBOOK

i swear 2 god if u took it and it is bitter i am coming over right now, u dumbass

calm down man, I didn't take it, ok? I was just wondering for future reference.

Stan rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, and sniffed in the dry air. He tried to think of patterns in the ceiling. He tried to remember those glow in the dark stars that his sister used to have. He always liked those. He was sure Craig probably had some, somewhere. If he didn't, he was really missing out.

SPACEBOOK

i do not fucking believe u

I didn't take it.

The taste kind of burned at Stan's mouth, and even though it wasn't pleasant in the slightest, he kept it solidly under his tongue. Occasionally, he would move it to a different spot under his tongue, but it never once crossed his mind to spit it out. He rubbed his jaw like that would help erase the taste.

SPACEBOOK

swear

How childish. Stan tapped his thumbs against the screen for a solid few seconds before responding.

SPACEBOOK

I swear.

swear on ur mothers life, fucknut

dude, a lil excessive there, don't you think?

i am coming over.

omfg fine I swear on my moms life I didn't take it.

that is more like it.

do not take it until i can be around i do not trust u to do this shit safely on ur own, u freak

when will you be over?

not today i am busy, fuzzball

k.

His head was starting to hurt. His entire body ached. He was tired. He felt strange. Like, used. He thought.

Of Kyle.

Of Friday.

And of Saturday.

And he wondered if Kyle actually cared.

Like, logically, he *knew* Kyle cared about him. He *knew* Kyle didn't want anything bad to happen to him. But, a part of him told him that wasn't true. A part of him was convinced Kyle just—

Like.

Wanted him for sex?

He felt sick to his stomach at that idea. It made him feel dirty, and... gross. It made him feel like he'd gone through something, even though the logical part of him told him he *hadn't* gone through *anything*. He was *fine*, for fuck's sake. He was happy. Happy, happy, happy, happy.

So, so happy.

Just breathe, dude, you're not Cartman.

What does that mean?

I wanted him to do it. I wanted to know what it would feel like.

Stan wasn't Cartman. He wasn't rough, he wasn't careless, he wasn't the antagonist that Kyle must want. He hadn't been good enough, maybe he never would be. He didn't know.

Before Stan knew it, the tab was gone, and he was convincing himself that standing up was a good idea. His feet didn't feel connected to his body, and his hands felt a little strange, but he didn't really think much of it. He pushed himself out of bed and ambled over to the Toolshed outfit, where the second tab of LSD still was. He contemplated taking that, too, but he couldn't bring himself to. Instead, he grabbed the flask and walked back over to his bed.

Stan sat with his shoulder pressed against the wall, his forehead against the edge of the window. He sipped silently at the whiskey as he watched a soft snow fall outside. He saw things he never thought he would notice. He saw fractals and snippets of things that were so lovely, little patterns in snowbanks and curls in clouds. The whiskey washed away the bitter taste lingering in his mouth, and soothed the tingle in his throat.

Drinking wasn't even an urge, anymore. It was just a habit. Like, involuntary. It just happened. Like breathing.

At some point, with the whiskey half-gone and his brain fogged and foreign, Stan decided that it was a good idea to call his sister.

The line rang thrice before she picked up, and when he heard her answer of, "what do you want, *turd*," he knew she was annoyed. She was always annoyed when it came to him, but he didn't care. He had to talk to her. Just one last time.

"Hey," he said, and that was it for a second. He stared at the flask, momentarily distracted by the designs created by the light. He shook himself free of the sidetracked mindset. "How are you doing?"

She didn't answer. She just repeated, "what do you want?"

"I want to know how you're doing," Stan answered, "that's why I asked, can't I call to see how things are going?"

"You sound like Mom," Shelley said. Stan could practically *hear* her eyes roll. His mouth smiled without him telling it to.

"Whatever," he muttered. Again, he tried, "how are you doing?"

A pause. Finally, Shelley answered, "I'm fine, I guess, I don't know. Why do you care, *turd*?"

"Because you're my sister—" Stan pulled the phone away from his ear, taking another swig of whiskey as quietly as he possibly could. He put the phone back to his ear. "— and I love you."

"Gross," said Shelley. "You're being all squishy."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Yes, *turd*, it's a bad thing. How are you?"

Stan rested his head against the window, swallowing back the urge to hiccup. He was always good at acting sober. The thought made him *happy*. He was happy. "I'm good."

"That's good."

So happy.

So, so happy.

“Are you gonna be okay?” Stan asked. That rendered Shelley speechless for another second or two.

“What type of question is that?” she spat. Something on the other end of the line crackled and rustled. Stan wondered what she had been doing. What she still *was* doing. “Of course I’m gonna *be okay*.”

“Okay,” said Stan. “I just wanted to make sure.”

Shelley said something, but Stan didn’t hear it. He was distracted, staring at things outside that he couldn’t figure out were real or not, or... something. What? Yeah. Yeah, his... antidepressants are in the bathroom, huh?

“I have to go, now,” Stan said.

Shelley was quiet for a second. “Okay. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah,” said Stan. “I love you.”

“Whatever, turd.”

Shelley was the one that hung up. Stan was fine with that.

He finished the whiskey off. He wished he had more. He dropped the flask on the ground, curling up in his bed with his arm under his head like a pillow. He stared at his phone. He traced designs on the black screen.

One last message.

MOM

Today 16:01

hey, mom. Just texting to let you know I love you.

How sweet. I love you, too, Stanley. :-)

The amount of time that passed after that is unknown.

It was enough for Stan to accept last night’s decision.

The room fell dark. The winter sky drifted with an after-effect of sun in the mid-afternoon. It could have been hours that went by. It could have been minutes. It could have been seconds. Stan didn’t know, nor did he suspect he would ever.

Stan stood from the bed, phone in hand, and left his bedroom. His actions were empty. Simultaneously, they were assured. Simultaneously, they were confident.

They say you know when you’re about to die.

If anyone could read Stan Marsh's thoughts in that moment, they would be simple.

This is it.

This is it.

And it feels good.

Except it doesn't.

KENNY

Today 16:48

H

H 2 u 2 lol

wuzzup friend

Today 16:52

?

Today 16:55

duuude u there lol?

hey I have a can u do me after favor?

ummmm wut lol

wym??

can u do me a favor

sry my finger slipped

dude holy shit it took ya long enuf ffs,,? It took u that long 2 type that?

anyway I guess I can do ya a solid. Wut chu need, bro?

tell craig it isnt his fault end tell kyle I love him

lol y,,, tell them that urself??

y do u want me 2 tell them that anyway

stan

hellooo

stan I have a question

stan?

why do you want me to tell them that?

Missed Call 17:02

stan are you there

Missed Call 17:04

stan pick up the phone

Missed Call 17:06

this isnt funny man

Missed Call 17:07

Missed Call 17:08

im not kidding dude pick up the goddamn phone im calling the police

Missed Call 17:10

pick up the fucking phone im coming over

Missed Call 17:11

Missed Call 17:12

Missed Call 17:12

Missed Call 17:13

what did you do stan

cmon talk to me man please

Missed Call 17:14

Missed Call 17:14

Missed Call 17:15

please

Chapter End Notes

Suicide is never the answer.

hotline number, if needed:

1-800-273-8255

you're not alone.

list of numbers for those outside of the usa:
<http://www.suicide.org/suicide-hotlines.html>

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

I don't understand.

Did you get high to kill yourself, or kill yourself to get high?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

that day.

Stan,

I have a confession to make.

There's a box full of letters under my bed. I wrote them, but I haven't sent them. I'm afraid to. Always have been. They're my comfort. Would you believe me if I told you they're all addressed to you? Would it make a difference, in the end? Maybe if I'd sent them. Maybe if I told you sooner.

I don't know when I started writing them, exactly. Maybe in middle school, when you started to smoke. Maybe I thought it would help immortalize your image. I don't know. I genuinely don't know.

Why did you do it?

I don't understand.

I generally think my deduction skills are good, but even I can't figure out why. I keep thinking about the lights and the sirens. I keep thinking about the weed. I keep thinking about what you said to me that day. I keep going over it in my head, and I keep trying to find somewhere where you acted weird. My brain keeps telling me it's obvious, in retrospect, but I can't come to a solid conclusion. You dressed nicer than usual. That's the only thing that was different. You dressed nicely. Did you do that on purpose? Did you plan it? Was it something I said? Did I do this to you?

I should have forced you to come with us that day. I should have made you abandon the "homework". I should have stayed behind, or followed you in, or known somehow. I should have texted you. I should have called. I should have visited after getting home from the court. Maybe I could have done something. Maybe I could have called 911, and if I did, maybe it would have been sooner, and maybe you would still be.

You aren't dead.

You can't be.

There's no way.

You're just sleeping.

You're just resting.

You're just absent.

You're not gone forever.

Except you might be, and I have to stop kidding myself. I need to grow up, I know.

I just always thought I would grow up with you.

The doctors won't tell me what you did, and your mom hasn't said a word to anyone. I don't think your dad heard any of what the doctors said. Kenny won't talk about what happened. Everyone is so destroyed, Stan. Everyone is so fucked up. Is that what you wanted? Is that what you fucking wanted?

That's not fair. I'm sorry. You didn't want to hurt anyone, did you? You probably thought you were doing everyone a favor.

What did you even do?

What did you take?

Did you get high to kill yourself, or kill yourself to get high?

You were an enigma to me, Stan. Always. In that way, I guess you really haven't changed a bit.

I won't ask you to write back. I won't disillusion myself anymore. I know you won't respond, and I'm sorry for asking you to. I won't ask you to come back, or wake up. I know it doesn't work that way. I just wish it did. I really wish it did. I'm hopeful, at least, that you're happy, wherever you are.

I'll stop bothering you with letters, now. I'd thank you for reading, but I know you'll never see these. Maybe I'll burn them.

I love you so much. I miss you.

I'll see you soon.

Forever yours,
Kyle.

P.S:

I lied. I didn't want him to do it. I'm so sorry.

This was all my fault, wasn't it?

Chapter End Notes

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so um. is now a good time to bring up the fact that this is part one in a series of three fics?

i probably should have brought that up sooner. please don't be mad.

fic 2 will be posted soon. if y'all are interested, the planned date is January 1st, 2019.

if y'all have any questions, feel free to ask them in the comments of this chapter (Epilogue). i'll answer all that i can.

thanks for reading Part 1: Sincerely, your super-best-friend Kyle.

as always:

comments / feedback / constructive criticism / questions; all is welcome.

cheers :)

End Notes

I told myself I would never write South Park fan-fiction.
I broke that rule.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!